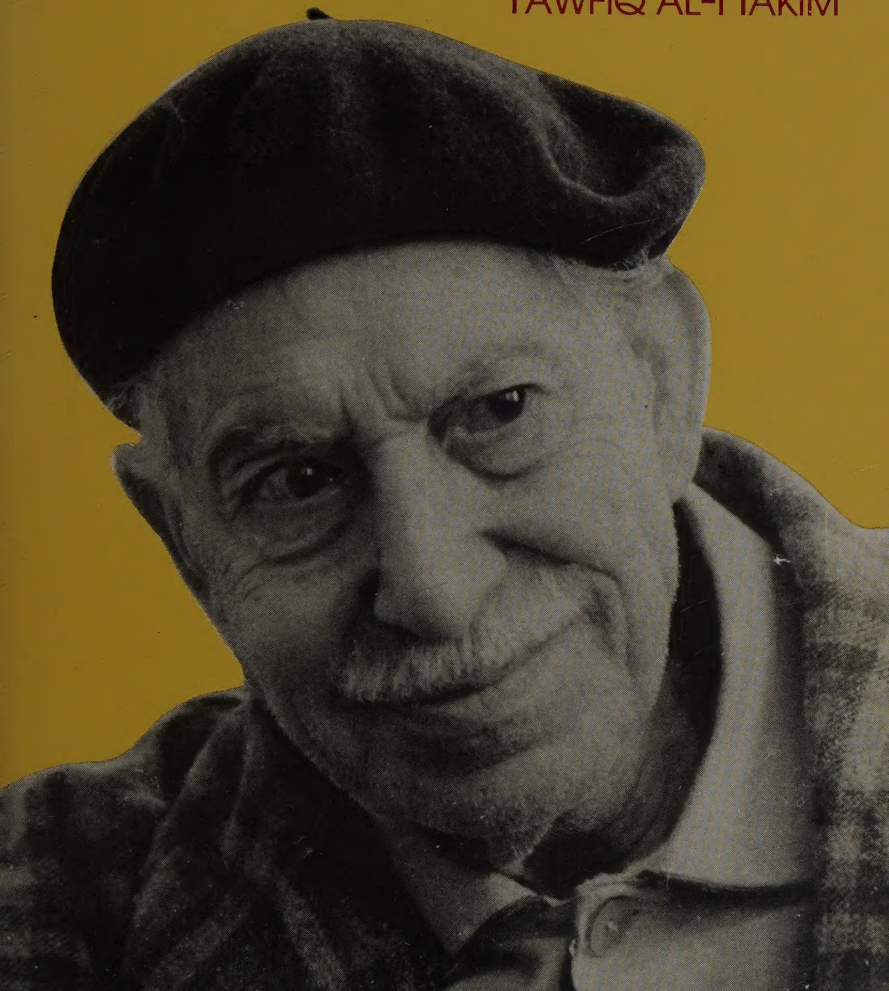
The PRISON of LIFE

An Autobiographical Essay

TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM



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Tawfiq al-Hakim

Translated by Pierre Cachia

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Introduction

Tawfiq al-Hakim belongs to a generation of Arab writers remarkably bold in their questioning of the values inherited from their immediate past and immensely influential in pioneering a form of modernism manifestly and often frankly shaped by the example of Western Europe.

The date of his birth has variously been given as anything between 1899 and 1903. He himself tells us in Chapter 12 of this autobiography that he followed his father's example in giving himself the freedom to choose different dates for different purposes. In his later years he opted for 1899, but that may be because he took pride in his continued intellectual vigor at an advanced age. If only because he was still in secondary school in 1923, and even allowing for the vagaries of his formal education described in this book, the likelihood is that he was two or three years younger than he claimed. He died in 1987.

He was not only long-lived, but also—like most of his contemporaries—immensely prolific and versatile. His contribution to the theater has been massive and seminal, for he was the first Arab to acquire a literary reputation mainly as a dramatist, and he wrote more than seventy plays of remarkable variety. Yet he is also the author of several novels, of short stories, and of essays.

Curiously, very few of his plays have a contemporary setting. His novels, on the other hand, all have a strong autobiographical content, and at least one of them, *The Diary of a Provincial Prosecutor*[1] is a literary and social document of lasting importance.

This autobiography (which covers only the first part of al-Hakim's life, until the middle 1930s) purports to be an attempt to understand himself, largely in terms of his genetic inheritance. Few will be convinced of his conclusions on this score. Some may even sense that at the heart of his relation with his father was a demon he ultimately feared to face. Yet the obligation of candor that the author places upon himself is fulfilled in the actual relation of events. One result is a number of touching self-revelations. Even more substantial is the all too rare witness to the character of family and social relations of a none too distant generation. But most arresting and valuable of all are the author's reminiscences about the Egyptian theater in the first quarter of this century.

Except in moments of heightened emotion, al-Hakim's style in this book is nothing short of chatty, yet with a marked tendency to bracket the intended sense between a pair of near-synonyms, an elaboration of the hendiadys, more common in Arabic than it is in European languages. I have tried to retain these features in the translation. The author's casual approach, however, does result in somewhat loose structures, some hackneyed diction, and

repetitiveness. I have taken it upon myself to condense some paragraphs, but without sacrificing a single item of information. I have, on the other hand, added a very few phrases describing objects unfamiliar in the West, such as the implement used in the bastinado.

Finally, I have had to resort to a device I wish could be avoided in a literary text—the dreaded footnote. I have used it mainly to identify public figures not likely to be recognized by non-Egyptians, but also to point out allusions and inferences that may escape the Western reader.

Pierre Cachia

My hope is greater than my effort.
My effort is greater than my talent.
My talent is the prisoner of my nature.
But I resist!

1

These pages are not merely the history of a life. They attempt to account for, to interpret, a life. I am taking the lid off my human apparatus in order to investigate this 'motor' which we call 'nature' or 'character'—this motor which determines my ability and controls my destiny.

Let us start at the beginning, with the day on which I came to be on this earth.

Since we cannot choose our parents, since we cannot choose the parts out of which we are fashioned, let us examine these parts meticulously and honestly. Let us not shrink from overstepping a little our country's custom of placing one's parents and forefathers into rigid molds and fixed frames, befitting images of such perfection and piety and virtue as to defy any human analysis. We need a modicum of courage and candor in order to

discover at least something of our nature's make-up—this nature which imprisons us throughout life.

My father did not see me the day I was born. He was at his work a long way away, in a small village in the provinces. He was at the time the prosecution agent[2] in the administrative district of Santa,[3] so he let my mother go back to her home town of Alexandria, where there were ample health facilities, to give birth to me. So it was in that port, in the quarter known as Muharram Bey, in her elder sister's house, that I came into this life.

The sister's husband wrote him a letter which reads, word for word:

> We sent you a telegram today giving you the good news of your son's happy arrival. The details are that at ten o'clock last night your lady-wife felt pains similar to labor. I wanted to send the servant for the midwife, but she demurred, saying, "It may not be that." We stayed up watching her condition until two in the morning, when the pain became more intense, and there no longer was any doubt that the birth was near. At that point, we sent the servant. The midwife arrived at three and began her work, and at four our good friend was safely delivered. I saw him this morning, and found him to be like his father—except that he has no mustache!

So ended the worthy brother-in-law's letter. With the punctiliousness of which we shall see other signs later, my father jotted on the letter, in pencil:

> I was in Santa today, and received a telegram from my kind brother-in-law which read: "You have been blessed with a son. I reassure you and congratulate you." I was at the time in the courtroom, speaking to the judge 'Ali Bey Galal on various matters. The time was 12:30 by European reckoning.[4]

My father copied out this note in a small notebook in which he used to record some of his concerns, and which

I discovered after his death among other things he left behind. To the words above he added the following:

> My brother-in-law wrote me another letter asking me to choose a name for the child. I could not think of a suitable one, so I wrote to him leaving the choice of a name to the mother. I then went to Alexandria and visited my wife. I found her health improved. She told me that the child had been named Husayn Tawfiq al-Hakim. This name did not please me, and I determined to have it legally changed. On the same day I went to the photographer Mazhar Hawi and asked him to take six photographs of me as I wish to obtain a season ticket on the railway line between my place of work in the countryside and Alexandria.

I of course know nothing of the moment of my birth. It is my misfortune—as it is all men's—that we are born in a total mental blackout. Every one of our organs is functioning at the time of our birth, except that part of us which takes cognizance of the life into which we come. What would happen if we faced up to life with conscious minds from the first moment? What would happen would be a marvel: we would lose our minds instantly at the shock of this wonder, the wonder of life suddenly revealed to the one coming forth out of the realm of darkness and non-existence! But life uncovers itself to us in leisurely fashion, veil by veil, cover by cover. The wrappings are torn off us one by one, so we become accustomed to life and lose sight of its wonder.

Later, my mother recounted that I came into this world silently, without crying or yelling or howling as many children do. She therefore thought I was stillborn. Alarmed, she asked the midwife who had laid me down at a distance in order to give attention to the mother, "Why isn't he crying and howling like all healthy children?" Everybody then turned toward me and—they

claim—found me staring at the lamp with my finger in my mouth as if lost in wonder. What a story! Every mother wants to see a miracle in her son comparable to that of the Messiah, because that identifies her with Mary![5]

If it is established that I truly did not cry at my birth, the reason may have been that I was tired, weary, exhausted by the strain of being drawn into this world, or that my tongue was defective in some way, or that I suffered from general debility. Or, better than all these surmises, it might have been said—as was said of me when I grew up—that I chose silence and stillness out of stinginess, out of a desire to economize on unprofitable howling!

For all that, why is it that such legends about birth are never woven until later, when our role within society has been defined? It is the same with the hour of death. The hour when we are born and the hour at which we die—these are the two hours with which the imagination of others toys, because they are not within our keeping.

By the same token, I am of course incapable of describing the room in which I was born; but what I do know is that the house belonging to my maternal aunt's husband must have been appropriate to his social standing, for he was rather well off. He was a functionary of the royal estates, and the beneficiary of a religious endowment. I saw this house later on, when I was five or six and beginning to take notice. It was a small, one-story house, with a small garden in which was a trellis supporting a vine, which seemed to me then a veritable forest.

This relative used to spend freely, especially on drink and evenings out. For he was a young man at the time of my birth, fond of cup and bowl and of the company of men of charm who provided good fellowship and livened the night with wit and humor. He was himself—as

I was told and as I was able to judge for myself later on—a man of delightful conversation and excellent jest, quite well educated and widely read. This is evident from his style in the letter he sent my father informing him of my arrival "without a mustache!"

Those were the days of Cromer,[6] when anyone coming to Egypt deemed himself a master over us, or a candidate for such mastery. This relative of mine told the story that he was sitting with his friends once when a recently arrived foreigner came round to shine shoes. After he had had his shoes shined, he produced a coin and with it a visiting card which he presented to the foreign shoeshine man saying in a serious tone, "Here is my name and address, so you may remember me and look favorably on me when you have become a man of eminence, wealth, and position in our country!"

As for his wife—my mother's elder sister—she was totally ignorant. She could not read or write, and—after the fashion of her own mother, my grandmother—she could think only in terms of the superstitions that were current among women of her generation. Perhaps that was the reason her husband, who was a man of education and sense, escaped to late drinking sessions with men of wit and of letters.

My mother on the other hand was the younger daughter. Between her and her elder sister six conceptions had taken place, none of which was brought to term. There was a secret to this unrelenting mortality, according to my grandmother. She attributed it to an underground she-demon called the Cat, who sometimes appeared in the guise of a black cat. She did appear before her one night at supper-time, when she was eating grilled fish. The cat mewed begging for a piece, but my grandmother smacked her with the back of her hand and she disap-

peared. After that, whenever my grandmother conceived she felt something like a slap on her belly, whereupon the foetus immediately aborted. So it was until the seventh conception, when she was advised to call in a well-known astrologer at the time, called Abu 'Ugayla, to provide her with amulets that would shield her from evil. She did call him in, and he protected her with seven amulets, so my mother lived.

This grandmother of mine was good-hearted and even-tempered. She struck me as the opposite of her daughters, both the elder and the younger, who were sharp in temperament, their ire roused by the least little word or the most trivial incident. But then I knew this grandmother only in her maturer years, whereas I am told that in her youth she was the equal of those two in sharpness and in fiery nature.

Never did I know the two sisters to be on good terms. Antagonism and estrangement were the usual pattern of life between them. Moments of peace were as short-lived as summer clouds—exceptions or abnormalities which neither party believed could last. Can there be 'coolness and wholesomeness' between two fires?[7] I shall never forget my grandmother's helplessness, caught between the constantly feuding sisters. She had no ploy or concern other than to try to reconcile them, but to no avail.

My mother was descended of seamen, of the kind who were termed *bughaziyya*, or 'harbormen.' It would seem that the family was of Turkish or Persian or Albanian stock—I don't know precisely. At any rate, my mother's and my grandmother's looks, both being blue-eyed, were indicative of a foreign origin. Neither I nor my brother inherited such coloring or anything approaching it, for it seems that my father's undiluted *fellah* complexion was enough to tint an entire blue sea.[8]

My mother's maternal grandfather was called Kala Yusuf, and it is said that he came from Kavala in Albania. Her paternal grandfather was called Hagg Milad al-Bistami, and his son—my mother's father—Sulayman al-Bistami. It was reputed that he had a family tree that connected him with Abu Yazid al-Bistami, the well-known mystic.[9] My mother told me that her roots went back to Persia, but that the family moved to Turkey and then to Egypt. All this I heard without paying much attention or attaching much importance to it—I am merely relating here what clings to my memory of what I was told as a child.

All these *bughazi* people used to pass the trade on from father to son, mastering it by practice. They had their own steam boats with which they piloted ships into the harbor. They used to buy these boats communally out of their own resources, and to divide profits in ratios that were then split among the family when its head died. So it was that when my grandfather died, my mother inherited a portion.

She was not more than three years old when her father died, he himself being a young man of about thirty-five. He died without her having seen or known him, and throughout her life she used to question anyone who had seen or known him: What was he like? What of his looks? His character? His qualities? She told me that he was among those that the Khedive of the time termed 'rebels' because he was among 'Urabi's supporters.[10]

All through her life, she was nursing a picture of him in her imagination worthy of heroes or prophets or saints.[11] In her reckoning no oath was more binding or weighty as one by Sidi al-Bistami—so she taught me when I was little. She might allow that I was lying if I swore by the life of the Prophet, but if I said, "By the life

of Sidi al-Bistami" she would not tolerate any breach: My words would have to be truthful, or in her eyes it would be the ultimate sin.

My grandmother also was in the full bloom of youth when her husband died. She was urged to marry the husband of her deceased sister, so she would be caring for her sister's children along with her own under the wing of a husband who would not be a stranger to her or an interloper in the family. It was good, sensible advice. And yet what happened, as often does, is that good, sensible advice turns into the opposite when translated to reality. My grandmother did lavish affection on her own children, i.e. the two girls; but her sister's children she rejected and neglected, treating them as one might treat an enemy's offspring. Her husband noticed this, but used to shut his eyes.

An instance of how she spoiled her daughters is that my mother used to hang her swing in the doorway of her stepfather's room, and to cling to the ropes and swing hard until the joints of the doorway were loosened. If then the man came home weary, exhausted by a tough seaman's work, saw what had happened to his door and made some remark, the little girl would burst into tears in his face and run to her mother complaining, whereupon the mother would raise hell because he had upset her orphaned daughter. As for the orphaned daughter, she would immediately go out into the lane pretending to weep and shouting, "My mother's husband has beaten me, my mother's husband has beaten me!" And the neighbors would tut-tut and say compassionately, "There is no might or power except in God.... Poor girl! A stepfather, of course.... What is to be expected of a stepfather?"

Among the children of this man was a young son who had learned to read and acquired a taste for stories. He

used to pass on to the family tales from the Arabian Nights or other sources. My mother found great joy in listening to these stories, and thanks to the guile she exercised over the entire family and to the power of her personality from an early age, she used to compel this maternal cousin of hers to abandon his work in the harbor or to delay the start of it a little, and to stay up late into the night to tell her more of these romances and stories.

It seems that he must be given credit for her learning to read and write—a shameful thing for a young woman in those days. All the learning that a girl like her was allowed to acquire consisted of the elements of embroidery, sewing, and dressmaking at the hands of an 'instructress.' There was in Alexandria at the time such a foreign 'instructress' who had started a school or something of the kind, and to it my mother and some others of her own age went and acquired a measure of learning. Yet with the help of the girl herself and her mother, this young cousin kept badgering the father until he was allowed to get her a teacher to help her memorize the Qur'an and to teach her the alphabet.

This led to her learning the elements of reading and writing. The rest was taken care of by her iron temperament and all the stubbornness and willpower and determination that went into it, together with her native intelligence, her bounding, ambitious spirit, and her defiant wish to read for herself the stories and romances that had captivated her heart. It was not long before she had learned to decipher script and had attained a measure of proficiency in reading and writing that enabled her to gain access to what she wanted. She thus became more enlightened than any of the women of the same generation in her family. Between her and her mother or her elder sister there was therefore a huge distance, a

bottomless abyss, for knowledge and learning were words that had no existence in their world.

It may seem strange in our age to imagine an entire world that one day existed—and perhaps somewhere one still exists—without the words 'science' or 'knowledge' in its vocabulary. For today we live in a world distinguished by people wanting to open their eyes every morning on something new, and in which knowledge comes to them with their cup of coffee or tea in the form of a newspaper or a radio broadcast (so that whoever cannot read can yet listen).

No one today can be entirely isolated from the sources of knowledge, which run as water runs in pipes. The meaning of 'knowledge' has altered accordingly—it encompasses the deep and the shallow, the important and the trivial. And people can choose to which kind of knowledge they help themselves. Such a choice was unknown to people of former generations. Between them and any kind of science or knowledge stood obstacles which they had to surmount by effort and will. This is why I give due weight to the will my mother exerted in learning to read, just as I realize what difficulties faced such a woman as my grandmother in becoming something other than what she was to begin with.

Yet she was not the only one in her environment and in her age whose whole interest lay in the means of controlling her husband's household and his children (and she got what she wanted), for I understood from my mother that she and her elder sister, together with their mother, were the ones who really ruled the household. Everyone, from the mother's husband to his many children, was at their beck and call for any desire or whim they had. On the occasion of a feast or a birthday, presents and toys and sugar dolls were brought in for them alone.

All this was tolerated until something happened that brought down the final curtain. It was that the elder daughter—my mother's sister—got married. She was supplied with her trousseau and taken in procession to her husband's house, and from that moment all the sense that was left in my grandmother flew out of her head. She was to be found only in her elder daughter's house, sitting by her, assisting her, pampering each new child of hers—and by God's grace they were many, each 'dropping on the other's head,' as the saying is. Add to this the similarity in mentality between the mother and the elder daughter, both of them spending their free time in working magic on the mother's husband in order to bring about dissension between him and his children so that they should have their own way entirely unobstructed. Things got so bad that the husband could stand it no longer, so one day when his wife left to spend some days with her elder daughter, she had the surprise of receiving her letter of repudiation at the hands of a servant.[12]

All through my childhood, I used to hear from my mother and my grandmother the tragedy of this divorce as if it was the tragedy of al-Husayn's slaughter in Kerbela.[13]

As a boy, I used to sit at my grandmother's side as she made her coffee with her own hands, and I listened to her recounting her tragedy and sorrowed with her. And she loved me a great deal because I was good at listening to her and to her one remaining hope in life, which was that amity should reign between the two sisters, for she had no refuge other than their homes.

2

Such were my grandmother and her elder daughter. As for the younger daughter, my mother, her life went on in the manner described until she too got married.

She told me the story of that marriage. Because the prospective groom's mother had died, it was his paternal aunt and his sister—both provincials—who came to Alexandria in search of a bride. Fate, or chance, or that mysterious Wisdom which remains unknown to mankind to this day and which always manifests itself in such circumstances and brings together two out of millions with unimaginable consequences—Fate, then, led them to my mother.

They spotted her at some wedding and deemed her exactly what was to be sought and hoped for: she was an orphan, and without a father at her back the like of her

could be expected to live under a husband's wing without whimsy or arrogance.

The aunt and the sister therefore called, decked in shiny new silk wraps of the kind prized in the provinces, and redolent with the yokelish scent compounded of lavender and saffron. With them they brought—such was the state of photography then—a tinplate likeness of the groom wearing the sash of his office as a prosecutor. Ambitious as she was, my mother no sooner saw this badge of office than she lost all reason and secretly resolved not to let go of it. She knew what it meant, for her family home had windows onto what was known as 'the Pasha's Course,' i.e. the way leading to the palace of Ras al-Tin.[14] There on the day of the Feast[15] would pass the procession of high government officials in their ceremonial attire, and among them would be members of the judiciary wearing such sashes. Ever since she first saw this, she wished herself a husband with such a sash. Merchants and *bughazi* men of the sea had come forward as suitors, but she used to burst into tears and force her mother to refuse them. But at the sight of this bearer of a sash of office, her face lit up.

The aspiring groom's family, however, did not offer a respectable nuptial payment.[16] They argued that he was still a young man at the beginning of his career, 'his bones soft' and his shoulders incapable of carrying a huge sum as yet. At this the mother was roused to fury and indignation. She refused, beating her breast and exclaiming, "How the enemies would gloat! Am I to surrender my daughter for dust money?" It does seem that the brideprice was indeed meager, amounting to no more than fifty napoleons, the napoleon being the gold coin in use at the time, worth less than a guinea.

The groom's relatives were shown the door, but the eager daughter secretly sent a maid after them, asking them to come back as the mother had consented. And in the end the mother had no choice but to surrender to her determined daughter's will. Reproach and chiding had no effect, nor her shouting in her pure Alexandrian dialect, "Have we come to this that daughters impose their way of thinking and choose husbands?"

As for my father, he wrote in pencil in that little notebook already encountered, on a page headed 'Date of Marriage' what I transcribe word for word:[17]

> The wedding night was the night of Friday—that is to say, the evening of Thursday, 25 April, corresponding to the night of 7 Muharram, in Alexandria, in the house of ... (Here was named the mother's husband). I remained in the house as a guest, together with the bride, until Thursday, 2 May, when I left heading for the estate in Saft al-Muluk (meaning the estate belonging to his father, Shaykh Ahmad al-Hakim). On that same day I journeyed to the vicinity of Zarqun to attend the wedding of the children of Hagg ... (a relative), and returned with my father to his estate on Saturday 4 of the same month. On the Sunday, I left for al-Mahalla al-Kubra where I am employed, my twenty days leave having come to an end. On the Wednesday evening, I left for Alexandria, and was met at the station by my brother-in-law. We went immediately to his house, where my bride was. I remained there until Saturday 9 May, then we all came—my bride, my mother-in-law, and I—to al-Mahalla al-Kubra.

This is all that my father recorded on the subject, but if we turn the page over, we find that he wrote another heading at the top: 'Record of what was spent out of my own pocket by reason of marriage, beginning 15 April.' He then put down a long list, intriguing in its details and

for its precision, out of which I reproduce the following items, again literally:

17 piasters second-class ticket from Mahalla to Saft al-Muluk, 14 April
10 piasters into the hand of 'Abduh the servant, out of his wages
2 piasters hiring of a donkey, same date
5 piasters clearance fee for chickens to Alexandria
5 piasters tips to servants, same date

He did not mention in his notebook what occasioned these outlays, so I do not know where it was that he rode the donkey said to have been hired for two piasters, and in what way the ride was caused by the wedding. Similarly, he did not clarify who the servants were on whom he lavished five piasters, but since the item is registered under the article 'marriage' it must refer to the servants of the bride's family—i.e. those employed in her stepfather's and his brother-in-law's houses, since he had split his stay as a guest between the two.

For all that, I do not believe that my father was stingy by nature, for true miserliness must be combined with a desire to hoard money, and he had no money to hoard. He was poor, depending solely on his salary, which was modest at that time. It is true that his father owned an estate in Saft al-Muluk, in the province of Buhayra, extending to about eighty acres. But what good was that when the father had charge of four wives, in addition to those he had divorced, and each wife and ex-wife had children by him, totaling quite a number?

It used to be recounted that the much-married in the countryside did not know their children or distinguish one from the other. When one of them was seated on the mastaba[18] and saw a boy or youth passing by, he would call out, "Whose son are you, boy?" he might answer, "I

am the son of Sattuta"—or Khadduga, or Hanim, or Khadra, and so on.

There was no way of sorting out or identifying these children except by their clothes. One had only to look at a boy's clothing: if it was ample and well made, then he was the child of a new wife, but if it did not even stretch down to cover his knees, then he was certainly the child of an old one! For the practice was for an older man to bring home a length of cloth on feast days, and hand it to the new wife, the favorite, on the understanding that it was meant for all. She would start with herself and her children, making whatever clothing she pleased, and then cast the remainder to the others. My father was a son of the first wife, and she died while he was still a lad. I have no certain knowledge of the details of his childhood or of the circumstances of his early upbringing, for he said little and suppressed much relating to his person or his concerns. All I heard is that the idea of sending children to school or keeping them there was resisted by most provincial fathers in those days: they wanted their sons to stay on the land. My father, however, always referred to his own as an enlightened man who had enrolled in al-Azhar and was at the start a classmate of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh,[19] but then he had to return to the village to cultivate the land he had inherited from his forefathers; were it not for these acres that had come to him, he would have pursued his education as did his great colleague. I myself got to know my grandfather toward the end of his life, and saw him as a venerable, imposing-looking old man, dressed in the wrapper, cloak, and turban distinctive of Islamic scholars, and wearing thick glasses. His appearance was indeed close to that of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, with which we are all familiar.

My father was dutiful toward his, honoring him and defending him and his ways. He used to say, for example, that he had so many marriages only because he was never matched with the wife that measured up to his notions. Whenever he thought he had found the right match, he was disappointed, and so he went on from error to error, always trying to correct his errors because to do so is a virtue, until at last he succeeded in finding a civilized wife, and he settled down with her. This makes sense.

My father also used to describe to me what efforts and what struggle the love of knowledge and of learning then entailed. He and some of his brothers who had come to love the village school and were attached to learning would, at the beginning of each school year, recruit someone to intercede with their father so they might be allowed to carry on for another year. For all his desire that they be educated, he would always stipulate that the year for which they pleaded would be the last, after which they would go back to agriculture; then when the year was over they would repeat the entreaty, swearing that the next year would be the last. So they went on, one year giving birth to another until they completed their secondary education, and my father was on the threshold of the School of Law. His father then put up no opposition, because he now aspired to see one of his sons in the ruling set!

The youth of that time used to fight to the point of desperation in order to get an education. All the forces were against them—their families, their society, and their government! They were content with little, with less than little.

My father, along with some of his brothers and relatives and colleagues who had moved to Cairo for their studies, shared a single dwelling. They cooked for them-

selves once a week—on the Friday, the day of rest. The remainder of the week they fed on what could be readily bought in the market, such as cheese or fava beans, because they were too immersed in their studies to prepare a home meal. Friday however was the day of luxury and self-indulgence when they undertook to cook. And what was it they cooked? One dish and never any other, because it was cheap—that it was something cooked over a fire was dignity and delectation and delight enough. It was lentils!

One Friday, they had to leave the pot of lentils on the fire, in the care of the youngest brother, while they went out on some business or other. No sooner had they left than this brother also went out, to amuse himself with some companions of his. He alone among them was much inclined to trifle and to play truant, and he never did well at school for all that they rebuked him and beat him. When he did remember the pot of lentils, he found that the contents had boiled over and run onto the floor of the room, mingling with its dust. What did he do but scoop the mixture of lentils and dust with his hands and put it back into the pot! The brothers came back with radishes and leeks, promising themselves a tasty meal, but when they fell to it they found more dust than lentils in their mouths. They ganged up on their brother and pressured him until he confessed. For losing them their one weekly cooked meal they gave him a beating, so he ran away.

They expended even more effort in searching for him than they had in correcting him and urging him to study. At last they found him. To stop him from running away again, my father then got the idea of tying him round the waist with a rope and suspending him from a pulley attached to the ceiling of the room. So it was that when-

ever they had to leave him alone they used to immobilize his arms and then pull on the rope that went through the pulley so he was bodily lifted up and stuck close to the ceiling like one of the pressurized gas lamps that used to be known as 'globes.' A strange idea and a mark of my father's genius—I do not know how it occurred to him!

Yet such punishment did not deter their brother from his tricks. It happened once that one of them returned from the village with a quantity of rice and several pairs of pigeons. They all rejoiced at the prospect of an uncommonly sumptuous meal. They got hold of a large platter—called a *mansaf* in the countryside—and after cooking the rice they put it on the platter in one big high pile. They also boiled the pigeons, and as the sharing worked out at a pigeon per person, each placed his pigeon in front of him on top of the rice. Then all assembled round the platter and began to eat.

Very quickly, the youngest brother devoured his pigeon, bones and all. Then he lightly dug into the pile of rice, his fingers creeping in something like a tunnel—or, say, acting as a submarine—until they were below the pigeon of the one sitting opposite. Skillfully he pulled it down and drew it to his side. Its rightful owner was busy gobbling rice, but the next he knew was that his pigeon had suddenly disappeared, although he had not seen any hand stretch toward it. He did not tumble to what had happened until he saw it in that youngest brother's mouth. He burst into a rage, and so did the others in sympathy, and my father stood up shouting, "Get me a pair of pliers so I may pull out this rascal's teeth!"

The youngest brother feared the threat might really be carried out so he ran away, and this time he left the country altogether and went off to Syria, working his way as a sailor on a sailing boat. Years later he reappeared

in his village and resumed residence there, busying himself with husbandry and merry-making, and more merry-making than husbandry.

My father on the other hand persisted with the others in studying hard and assiduously. He did not go to the School of Law right away as did most of his companions, but preferred to enroll in the School of Languages along with a colleague—'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi[20]—until it became evident to him that the prospects were better in the School of Law, so he wasted no time in abandoning languages for law.

It seems that my father was among the best students in the School of Law. Among his papers and other possessions I found, while a lad, a piece of brass with which I used to play without realizing what it was. When I learned to read I found that engraved upon it were the words 'Law Journal.' It turned out to be the seal with which receipts for subscriptions were stamped. Then an old number of this journal came into my hands, and there I read that it had been founded by three Law students: Isma'il Sidqi,[21] Lutfi as-Sayyid,[22] and Isma'il al-Hakim. These students must therefore have had a measure of maturity and breadth of vision.

There is no doubt that many of the students of that period had a good sense of the value of cultural formation, and had an amazing capacity for reading and learning. Some, including my father and 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi, maintained some kind of a link with al-Azhar, kept up their reading of the Qur'an and books of canonical jurisprudence, and waded into volumes of classical poetry and prose literature as well. I found in our house enough of these 'yellow books'[23] to fill many crates and chests. I benefited from some of them later on.

It was an impressively manly generation. This shows even in its jesting and its pranks. I find no better picture to bring out this jocular side than the one drawn by 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad[24] and published in the newspaper *Akhbar al-Yawm* in June 1954, when a strange fate doomed me to be elected to the Academy of the Arabic Language, specifically to occupy the chair formerly held by 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi. Al-'Aqqad wrote:

> It is appropriately timed that our colleague Tawfiq al-Hakim has been received at the Academy, and received to replace 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi, God rest his soul. The great man of letters we have lost could not have imagined that he was introducing his successor in the Academy when he talked to me for about an hour about Tawfiq and Isma'il al-Hakim. He said, "God rest his father's soul—he was, like his son, a man of inventions." And he went on to tell me of Isma'il, his companion at school and later in the judiciary. "He got it into his head once to invent a different kind of tobacco from the one people smoke, asking himself, 'Who imposed American tobacco on us, and banned us from smoking a tobacco grown in our own country?' His first experiment was with wild thyme and some other herbs sold by spice merchants, but he did not persevere with it for more than a matter of days.
>
> "One of our class-mates, Mahmud 'Abd al-Ghaffar, got fed up with our friend Isma'il because of this inventiveness, or this kind of intellectual pretentiousness that came to be known colloquially as 'philosophizing,' or call it this ostentation. So one day, when it was his turn to duplicate the class notes,[25] he purposely ran off one set less than required, and distributed them to all in the class—there were twelve—except Isma'il. When, a week later, it was Isma'il's turn, he did not forget the recently started feud, but made a shortage of glue in the duplicating room his excuse. However, he then gave the game

away by adding at the end of the batch some verses of his own composition:

> I ran off fascicules—a full two-sixes—
> But then ran out of sticky mixes.
> Let not the deprived reproach us for that:
> There's fair return in a tit for a tat!"

The venerable gentleman laughed out loud and then went on to say:

"I saw the copies, and realized that the tussle was between Mahmud 'Abd al-Ghaffar with his rustic directness, and Isma'il with his poetic quirks, so I went to 'Abd al-Ghaffar and told him, 'Do something! There are no notes for you this week.' Thereupon 'Abd al-Ghaffar strode into the duplicating room, snatched the papers, spread them all in front of him, chose the clearest and cleanest and walked away with them, with Isma'il looking on and hearing him call out after he had crossed the threshold, 'You can chew your two-sixes, Mr. Philosopher!'"

He then related one of many stories involving him, Lutfi (that is, the much revered Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid), and Isma'il al-Hakim. He said:

> "We were sitting at a café in Opera Square when Isma'il appeared at a distance, heading for us. I called out jocularly, 'A lofty welcome to the philosophizer!' Immediately he retorted, 'With no aspersion from the apostrophizer.'"
>
> 'Abd al-'Aziz commented, "So he capped our sally—and he always did outdo us with his quick answers and his improvizations in verse and prose."

So ended al-'Aqqad's article, but he returned to the subject on another occasion, in the newspaper *al-Akhbar* on 21 August, 1963:

I read in today's papers good news for smokers, for they will soon be able to smoke cigarettes stuffed with apple and beetroot and various vegetables and fruits instead of nicotine. . . . Yet I heard more than ten years ago of a new cigarette mixture invented by Isma'il al-Hakim, the father of our colleague Tawfiq al-Hakim, the basis of which was a combination of herbs, mainly thyme . . . .

Following one of the battles that took place in the Academy, our great colleague 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi (Pasha)[26] invited me to lunch at his home in Butrus Pasha Street, close to the one in which I live. As we entered the lounge, the senior judge found a copy of a new book by Tawfiq al-Hakim, so he muttered, "God rest his father's soul. Is your friend, I wonder, a philosopher like his father?" I asked, "Was his father a philosopher?" He answered: "In a sense. He liked to launch some innovation every day, even concerning smoking. It occurred to him to ask himself one day why people made cigarettes out of tobacco instead of out of the many herbs that fill the pots of our own spice vendors—out of thyme, for example, which has a pleasanter smell and a better flavor. He came to us one day when Lutfi and I were in a café in Opera Square, with one of these 'philosophic' cigarettes in his hand, and he proceeded to expound his smoking philosophy along with other philosophies on various legal and social matters, which we had studied together in the School of Law."

'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi's words ended there, but al-'Aqqad concluded his article with:

I recalled this older invention as I read about the new American one, and I wanted to remind our colleague Tawfiq al-Hakim of it so he should not miss the opportunity of claiming royalties on the earlier one if the experiment should succeed. His legal rights cannot be unknown to him.

This strange picture which al-'Aqqad derived from 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi I regret to say I never myself saw in my father. The speed of repartee and ready address had apparently disappeared by the time I grew up and became observant. Also gone was the image of the artful poet–philosopher, along with the small beard which, I am told, he grew in defiance of everybody, until his colleagues—Isma'il Sidqi and others—shaved it on his wedding night, "out of compassion for the bride," they said. All the features of this distinctive personality had vanished.

All I found before me was a staid and stolid man who pondered so long and considered his words so carefully before uttering them that he gave the impression of being slow to understand and to respond, something which gave my mother ideas and induced in her a feeling of superiority, for she constantly used to tell me, "I am cleverer than your father. I am quicker in understanding than your father!"

The impression I have of my father is in fact closer to dullness. As for his inventiveness, his artfulness, his 'philosophizing,' I am puzzled that they should once have been his. Is it, I wonder, that the responsibilities of the bench, of marriage, of the family had frittered all poetic qualities in him? I don't know. There were indeed moments, actions, situations which uncovered the old mettle, but their coloring and their framework had altered, for they affected only the day-to-day reality, the actuality of his practical, professional, or marital life, and bore no relation to poetry or thought or artiness. I never heard from him a description or a mention of those youthful days of his. It was as if he had forgotten them, or chose to ignore them.

What happened, exactly? Was it merely marriage and its burdens, was it my mother with her powerful person-

ality, rebellious, aggressive, dominant, that directed her husband's development the way she wanted it, that confined his energy within the material family framework? It is a fact that my mother was always greatly concerned about income, and my father had nothing but his salary, for his mother was penniless and his father had inherited only five acres of land, which were already mortgaged and which dissolved into the debts of the legacy. The salary my father drew from his profession was therefore the only security my mother had.

That for long was my belief, and for a long time it held me back from marriage. But my mother assured me that the responsibility was not hers, it was ascribable to my father's nature. It is true that he was endowed with a kind heart that would not allow him to take a road inconsistent with his duties as the head of a family. His sense of responsibility and of duty was always stronger in him than anything else. If he were to retain his earlier liberated image, he was bound to indulge in ventures that might rock his marital life, and he was not willing to cause any harm to the innocent members of his family.

There is a path which sometimes calls for mad action. I noticed this at some junctures of life, and used to say, "What cannot be solved by reason must be solved by madness." But there also are some natures which refuse such solutions under any circumstances if they damage others. Such was my father's nature.

Furthermore, his strong feeling of responsibility and duty as the head of a family was dwarfed by his sense of responsibility and duty as a judge. This was tested when the notorious case of torture[27] in the province of Buhayra, during the First World War, was presented before him. This was when the English laid a plot againt the provincial governor and the chief of police, to make an example

of them because they had not displayed a spirit of collaboration with them. My father detected the smell of menace and terror hanging about him, and felt that his position was in jeopardy if he were to oppose or object, but he paid no attention to anything but the voice of his conscience, and pronounced a judgment contrary to what the English wanted. They then had his decision rescinded, and produced someone who reopened the case and reached the conclusion they wanted. Because of this, my father's promotion was held back.

There was also an instance in which my father presided over a court one of whose members was an Englishman. When twelve o'clock struck, the English member requested the adjournment of the session so that he might go home and have lunch with his wife, but my father told him firmly, "Our session may go on until three o'clock, perhaps even four. Take this into account, Sir, so long as you are with us here. As for adjourning the session so that you may have lunch at home, that is out of the question." The English judge suppressed his reaction, and the next day he came humbly carrying a small basket containing a light collation to take during the break.

My father's sense of duty, his nature that scorned roundabout measures in the service of self-interest and opportunism—this nature was among the principal reasons why he fell behind his colleagues in the hierarchy. He never once got an exceptional promotion, nor was he given any special consideration or preferential treatment.

Let us go back to the notebook which dates back to the days of his youth, for it is only there that we find references to his earlier life. On one of its pages he wrote:

> I left the School of Law, having obtained the final qualification—the *licence*—in the science of Law. I entered Government service, and was appointed a tem-

porary clerk in the Tanta tribunal under the examining magistrate Ahmad Bey Salih and Ahmad Effendi 'Abd al-Raziq.

He stops there.

What catches one's attention in this is that the graduates of that period, for all that they were few—the usual batch of graduands varied from ten to twelve—were placed at the very bottom of the ladder. There was no one below them, we see, except the messengers and the servants. This is no doubt the source of the toughness of their formation, for they got to know the job from its foundations in the lowest positions, and they then rose step by step. My father wrote on the same page:

> I was appointed assistant prosecutor and transferred to Mallawi where I remained for three months, and was then moved to Asyut, and then Girga.[28] I was then made an associate prosecutor in Itay al-Barud, but because our village Saft al-Muluk fell within that jurisdiction, I was transferred to Sohag. There I fell victim to dysentery and it lasted three months, so I wrote a letter—in Arabic—to the Prosecutor General, Corbet Bey, petitioning to be transferred to a prosecuting post in Lower Egypt, and I was sent to Benha. There I remained until transferred to al-Mahalla al-Kubra.

On yet another page he wrote:

> The Ministry of Justice decided to promote me to the rank of associate prosecutor, at a salary of ten pounds a month.

It seems that when my father's salary reached that point, he began to think of marriage. Perhaps what drove him to it was loneliness, and the illness he suffered.

To find a bride, he had to have the help of his family. Of his womenfolk in the countryside, there was only one who could carry out such a commission in the towns.

That was his father's new wife. She was of Alexandrian origin, white skinned, and endowed with a measure of beauty and of culture that made her the grand lady of the neighborhood and a favorite alike with the head of the family and with his children and his older wives. My father asked her, as he had asked the aunt and the sister already mentioned, to search for what he wanted, and he specified his desiderata: he did not want a wife who came from the houses of Pashas, with eunuchs sitting at their doors.

It was common knowledge at the time that men in the judiciary were snapped up by powerful and wealthy families, because a future awaited them in the government of the country. Most of his colleagues in fact married the daughters of Pashas. But he—perhaps because of his poetic make-up—had no such ambitions. What he wanted was a wife with a comely face, and a modicum of education and enlightenment.

This is how my mother was discovered.

3

The bride went to al-Mahalla al-Kubra, and when she entered her husband's house she had a shock: there was nothing there to eat except for a small tin containing a little clarified butter, and this was kept under lock and key as if it was a jewel case! She asked her husband what his actual salary was, and he answered, "Ten pounds." At this she cried out in distress saying, "Is that all?" His relatives when proposing marriage had said that his salary was over twenty pounds, to say nothing of what 'slips in.' He shouted at her, "Slips in? I am a prosecuting agent. How can anything 'slip in' to an honest prosecuting agent other than his official salary? Besides, there is a 'pension reserve' deducted from the ten pounds."

At this point, she was to tell me, she slapped her cheeks in her apprehension about the future. She was of

timidity—daring in respect of other people, timidity about herself. She pondered long about some way of ensuring her future for she asked herself, "If this man were to die tomorrow, what would I do?"

My father, on the other hand, saw the situation as natural, for it was the same for most of his colleagues. He told his wife, "Be grateful to God that I did not marry when I was a temporary clerk on five pounds a month, as most of my colleagues did! What would you have done then?"

But matters improved after that. It was not long before he was promoted to prosecuting agent at the fourth level of the Government cadre, at a salary of fifteen pounds. He also thought of providing some relief for his wife and suggested that she might accompany him on a trip to Saft al-Muluk so that he might present her to his father, in the hope of getting some assistance from him.

I had been born some months earlier, so my mother carried me in her arms and got onto the train, with my father at her side, delighted at the trip, looking forward to a beautiful outing in the countryside—a real honeymoon, even if a belated one. Having lived all her life by the sea, she had never seen the countryside, and could not tell apart the cows and the water buffaloes that she saw in the field from the window of the train.

Suddenly she sensed that her husband wanted to tell her something, but was hesitant. Then she saw him pick up his courage, lean over to her ear, and confide, "I have a word to say that I would like you to hear." She listened, although alarmed by the tone of his voice. He said, "If my father's wife addresses some harsh words to you, grin and bear it!" She felt—as she told me later—hot blood rush to her head and replied on the spot, "By God, if she speaks one word I shall answer with twenty!" My father

kept pleading with her, "I beg you . . . for my sake and my father's sake!" She did not answer. She spent the rest of the journey tight-lipped and depressed, the joy and elation of the outing gone.

She arrived at the estate and found a large house, in one room of which she and her husband and her child were lodged—in the wing reserved for the older wives, each one of whom had a room for herself and her children. The other wing, which had cleaner rooms and a pleasanter location, was for the aged head of the family, his new cultured wife, and her children.

The older wives were soon surrounding her, warning her of the arrogance and pride of the new one. One of them who was fashioning a dress and had a pair of scissors in her hand told her, "Tomorrow she will be at you with words that are as sharp as a sword." With the speed of an arrow my mother replied, "By God, I would cut her tongue with those scissors in your hand!" Within the hour, her words had been repeated verbatim to the lady of the house. My mother never knew how they reached her or which of the women present conveyed them to her. All she knew and remembered for the rest of her life was that the whole world went up in turmoil, that a tribunal had been constituted and the lady of the house was shouting at the top of her voice, "Call your master!" The master of the house, with all his dignity, his white hair, his wrapper and cloak, came in, occupied the center of the stage, summoned my father and ordered him to bring in his wife that she might be interrogated on whether she had actually spoken those words.

My mother entered with me in her arms, and her husband stood next to her, whispering in her ear that she should give the lie to what had been reported; but in her spirited way she answered, "I did speak them, and shall

speak them again to her face!" My father gave her to understand that if she persisted in that attitude, he would be forced to repudiate her.[29]

My mother used to expound to me how delicate her situation was, threatened with divorce with a child on her arm. If the blow should fall, there would be nothing ahead for her except the gloating of her stepfather, who always contended that the likes of her could never make a good marriage, and she would have no course to follow but to live in the house of her sister who hated her—and death would be preferable to that! In spite of all this, she could think only of her humiliating stance before this strange tribunal set up to abase her—she who was a bride and a guest.

She kept looking at the faces surrounding her. Everyone in this large house was present in court—all the older wives with their children, and those of her husband's brothers who were on the estate with their women. No one was left who did not attend, either to watch or to bear witness, true or false, either to curry favor with the master of the house or to dissemble before the favorite wife. Being a stranger, she had no ally or support among all these except her husband. But her husband had no concern other than to avert a crisis. He wanted her to deny or to apologize. She wanted him to stand by her, to rebel on her behalf, to protect her from his father's wife, even if this led to his withdrawal and his return with her to where they had come from. Instead, he stood at her side only to urge her to deny or apologize!

She would brook neither alternative. She insisted that she had said what she had said, and that she would cut off with scissors the tongue of anyone who dared to offend her. She actually repeated the words. At this the lady of the house cried out, and called upon the aged master to

bring down his wrath and vengeance upon his impudent daughter-in-law. My mother used to recount that my father then pulled her away by the hand, either muttering the formula of repudiation or threatening her with it, and took her back to her room. My mother was always worked up as she described the situation to me, and used to conclude by saying, "Your father let me down that day. He let me down despicably!"

Alas, I was not of an age to take in what had happened or to give an opinion on it. I never heard my father's version of the story, or his view of it. What I do know is that my father was dutiful toward his own father, extremely eager to please him and—out of consideration for him—to please his wife as well.

My mother maintained that the situation was saved only by the aged master himself, for he respected her courage and realized that she was not of the same mold as those older wives and would therefore have to be treated differently. He sought her out in her room, pacified her, and mended the bridges between her and his wife.

Nevertheless, my mother came away from her journey to the countryside with two results. The first was the confirmation of her pessimism regarding this kind of marital life. The second was the conviction that some financial resource had to be found to protect her from the vicissitudes of fate. As soon as full harmony had been restored between her and her husband and she perceived marks of loyalty and affection from him, she confided her intentions to him. His response was that he was a *fellah*, and understood nothing except land ownership.

Now thanks to the portion of the income from the *bughazi* enterprise and her share in the large house inherited from her father, she had at her disposal a sum of

money, which her sister's husband—with his inborn qualities of decency, manliness, and magnanimity—had managed to disentangle and save up for her. Out of it had come her trousseau, and with the remainder he had bought her a small plot in the area of Ras al-Tin. Her trousseau had not yet been moved in its entirety to al-Mahalla al-Kubra, so she wrote to her brother-in-law asking him to offer what was left of it, and the plot of land as well, for sale. Out of all this, she realized nearly a thousand pounds. In this project, my father gave her the fullest and most loyal support, and he searched long for what she wanted.

On a page of his little notebook is a paragraph which may or may not be relevant to this matter, but it reads:

> 1570 (one thousand five hundred and seventy acres) in the area of Balqun, pertaining to the late Amin Pasha Sid Ahmad, related by marriage to Isma'il Bey Sidqi. Reached by tramway from Kafr al-Dawwar to the station of Sidi Ghazi. Said land is near the estate of Mr. Mitri and that of Mr. Baba, known as the estates of Shakir Shuqayr and of Mr. Sidnawi. Asking price is five pounds per acre, but the aim is to get it at between two and three pounds.

Evidently that deal did not go through, but one wonders about these acres offered for sale at five pounds each and that my father wanted for only two or three—what kind of land was it? How good? What was it capable of producing? No doubt it would have required improvements costing many times its price, and into its sands and fertilizers and salts would have sunk all that my mother had saved or could save in a lifetime.

My father was so lavish with financial advice, as we shall presently see, that one could wallow in it up to one's ears. He dispensed some to me at the close of the First World War, when the German mark was losing value

following the country's defeat. I had saved ten pounds, scraped together by dint of patience and self-denial out of my allowance throughout my schooling. He came to me one day proclaiming the good news and saying, "In the Stock Exchange right now, a million marks can be had for ten pounds." And he kept enticing me until I handed over to him the ten pounds. He went away and came back with a great big check on the Deutsche Bank on which 'a million marks' was written in German. He presented it to me saying with the ring of a victor, "You are now a millionaire, Boy!" (He always addressed me as 'Boy' or 'You, boy—Tawfiq' even after I had been appointed a prosecutor!). With paper and pencil he kept making calculations saying, "The mark is bound to rise tomorrow. It is unimaginable that it should stay where it is in Germany once matters are settled. Let us suppose that it stabilizes at just one piaster. You will then have ten thousands pounds! Let us assume the worst possible and say it is worth only half a piaster. You would then have five thousand pounds. Five thousand pounds on the very worst estimate! What do you say to that?"

I kept dreaming of those thousands, until the truth, the bitter truth came out one day: Germany had decided to do away with the mark altogether. The great big check in my hand was nothing but paper and ink, and I had lost my ten pounds.

I did not at the time forgive my father the financial advice that had ruined me. By the same token, I have no doubt that those lines he entered into his notebook were part of his financial inspiration, and that the direction of his search for acres that could be counted in thousands and be paid for in piasters was also born of his imagination. But God proved merciful: his golden dream was not realized, but something else was.

There came onto the scene at that time a relative of one of my grandfather's older wives. He was a kindly man who liked my father and wanted to be of service to my mother. He heard of the advice she had been given to use her money in buying just ten acres of good land. He dissented and told my mother, "By God, I shall find you an estate of not less than seventy acres which, with effort, can be made good." He was as good as his word, and did find an estate of that size in the area of Abu Mas'ud, known as the Nuri estate, put up for sale at thirty pounds the acre and most of it fit for agriculture.

Here emerged a major obstacle. The sum required was 2,100 pounds, and all that was in my mother's hand was a thousand—nothing more. What was to be done? There was no way of getting this land without borrowing the difference from the Land-Mortgage Bank. An approach was made to the bank, and it agreed on condition that an expert be sent to value the estate. By a happy coincidence, the expert turned out to be one of my father's friends since schooldays. They had been neighbors in the lane where my father lodged as a student. He had become an engineer, contractor, and valuer. He remained a friend of the family all his life. He will be mentioned again later, so let me now give only his first name: Yusuf.

This engineer friend, Yusuf, put a good valuation on the land, and this allowed the bank to lend the sum required on condition that the estate be mortgaged to it and the debt repaid, with interest, over thirty years. I mention all these details because I lived through my early youth, graduated from the School of Law, went to Europe and came back, and was appointed a prosecuting officer, and all the time the mortgage had endured, the interest was being paid, the installments were being met, yet the debt has remained well-rooted, has acquired venerabil-

ity, and is determined not to vanish!

My mother always gave my father credit for having applied himself, run about, and exerted much effort faithfully and with energy over the purchase of this estate, until the exhausting formalities entailed in buying and registering land were completed. But she was taken aback and went mad, she said, when in my father's absence she took charge of some papers, and on reading them discovered that her husband had awarded himself the ownership of thirty acres, and registered only the remaining forty in her name!

She was, however, no tasty morsel or easy prey. When she saw his face again, she received him yelling and shouting, accusing him of misusing his powers of attorney, flinging at him allegations of fraud and crookedness, and with her inborn toughness of will she went on making his life a misery until he surrendered and submitted, and did what was needed to correct the record in the way she wanted it. It ended with all the deeds being in her name alone.

4

All this happened when I was still in my earliest years, at an age when memory is incapable of penetrating the thick fog encompassing it. For whenever we wish memory to go back to our childhood, we find it stopping at something like a solid, black wall against which we collide and beyond which we can see nothing except some obscure fragmented images, the significance of which perplexes us. And no matter how hard the grown-ups try to interpret them for us, their interpretation strikes us as much more paltry than the awesome size in which they appeared to us. The reason is that everything that moves in a child's world assumes forms that the minds of adults cannot encompass and therefore cannot interpret in a way that accords with the reality they assumed in that big/small/mysterious world.

An instance of this is the semblance of those demons, cloaked in white or in black, that used to appear to me behind doors and then disappear at the speed of lightning. I was utterly terrified by them, and nonplused at their ability to slip into and out of sight. I was told later on that these were the servant and the wet nurse who used to cloak themselves now in a white bedsheet and now in a woman's black wrap in order to frighten me and keep me quiet, because they found me a difficult child, impish and full of devilry.

My practice was to throw household articles and receptacles—spoons, forks, knives, plates, and other things—out of the window, then to look down at them and enjoy seeing them scattered about the street. I went beyond these one day, to a gold pendant which the wet nurse had bought out of savings from her wages. I took her by surprise, snatched the pendant from her breast and threw it out. The outside door had been locked by my mother as usual when she went out on a visit, to prevent the wet nurse from going out. So when the ornament was thrown out, its owner could only stand at the window looking at it. She was driven to distraction and kept shouting, calling for help from passers-by and neighbors, while I—I am told—feasted my eyes on the scene, laughing.

I do not remember such incidents at all clearly, but there followed another stage, of greater clarity: my long illness. I was born, I know, in the fullness of health, but this lasted only a few years—four or five. Then illnesses beset me. I do not know what kind of illnesses, but they were not merely the usual childhood illnesses, such as measles, whooping cough, diarrhea, and the like. They took up several years, during which intervals of well-being were rarer than periods of illness.

I recall that my grandmother said to me while we were in Alexandria one summer, "I shall take you to visit the tomb of Sidi al-Tartushi."[30] He was famed for healing illnesses, especially the fever that used to stick to me like an evil companion. But there was one inescapable condition, and that was faithful observance of his votive prohibition. It meant total abstinence from the kind of Cheshire-like cheese known as Greek cheese, as it was said that he abhorred it. I was of course too young to question this assertion, or to ask whether Sidi al-Tartushi, who was one of God's elect in a bygone age, was a contemporary of the appearance of Greek cheese.

I did make the vow with all the sincerity of a naive, believing child, and I fulfilled it with complete honesty and punctiliousness. I remember that for a long time I never approached that cheese and never allowed it to touch my lips, although I was extremely fond of it. And I was healed!

Another image, also faded, that I recall is that of my mother's protracted illness. I remember her yellow-faced, long bedridden, emaciated to a frightening degree. It is said that it was after she bore me that she was subject to illnesses; before she was pregnant with me, she had been so full of health that she never had her fill of food. As a bride newly arrived in the conjugal home, she was shy of displaying her appetite before her husband, so she used to round off her meals in secret, in his absence, with anything edible her hand fell on. But her first pregnancy and then the birth damaged her severely. A doctor told her that one of her kidneys had been displaced, and that it might be put back into the correct position by another pregnancy.

Still clinging to my memory is the image of a small red basket containing fruit that was always by her bedside,

for a breakfast of fruit had been prescribed for her. I used to steal glances at these fruits and my mouth watered at the sight of them, but I was not allowed to approach them: I was told they were some kind of medicine.

All through her illness, my father had no concern other than to work for her recovery and to consult doctors all over the place. When my mother's illness persisted and her appearance changed, his provincial kinsfolk urged him not to burden himself with a sick woman but to think of marrying another, healthy and sound; but he contemptuously refused to listen to such words. And after he had despaired of medicines and doctors, he applied himself to reading medical books to find out what was wrong with her. I saw a huge book in three volumes, written in French—I have it to this day—which investigated the human body and represented its inner organs in magnified colored plates. There was a picture of a kidney that filled a whole page, showed its formation in detail, explained how it worked and what it needed to continue functioning regularly. My father, never wearying or flagging, would come away from his judicial work to peruse this book with his usual meticulousness in order to discover for himself the secret of her illness.

With his inborn patience, hardihood, persistence, and endurance, he used to study everything for himself minutely and extensively, as if it were a court case. Perhaps this also is a result of the basic formation of his tough old generation, so persistent in its research and exploration.

I sometimes used to amuse myself with the pictures in that book, being attracted by its bright colors and gilded binding. It astonishes me that this book has remained in my keeping to this day, moving with me from house to house and from era to era, never being lost although I have taken no special care to retain it. It seems that books

have destinies and life spans as humans have, some lasting for no reason, others disappearing for no reason either!

This devotion of my father's made the deepest impression on my mother, she used to say. It made her realize the extent to which he sanctified duty and cared for marital life. She also was loyal to him, and loved him greatly.

Some years after me, my mother gave birth to my younger and only brother. My father called him Zuhayr, seeking an augury from the name of the pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, whose famous 'suspended ode'[31] he had memorized. No doubt if he had been present at my birth he would have given me the name of one of those poets, and I would today be known as Imru' al-Qays al-Hakim, or Tarafa, or Labid, or something of the kind—but God was merciful!

The irony of Fate would have it that this brother of mine proved the most incompatible of all the inhabitants of Earth to poetry and its ways. He never mouthed a single line of poetry. Like my mother, the directions he took in life were strictly materialistic and practical. His hobbies were shooting, hunting, swimming, dancing, card-playing, and others things that I am incapable of describing or thinking about.

My mother remained ill for a little time after his birth, but then her health improved slowly until she was nearly well. She was fond of sweets and used to eat some after lunch, but when I stretched my hand toward them, timidly and hopefully, she used to tell me that they too were a medicine prescribed by the doctor.It seems, however, that I was not convinced for, faced with my protracted and imploring stance like a little beggar seeking alms, she would throw a piece to me saying, "Take it and go to the devil!" Then at the next lunchtime I would go to

her with my hand outstretched and plead, "Give me one and tell me to go to the devil!"

My younger brother, however, once he had grown a little, used not to stretch his hand out begging, but to rush forward and actually snatch out of her hand what he spotted before it disappeared into her mouth. To counter his raids, she resorted to locking the door on herself at the time she ate her sweets. But he was even more acquisitive and sly. As the time for the meal approached, he went into the room ahead of her, hid under her bed, and stayed on the look-out. When she had locked her door, felt secure, brought out the sweets and was about to pop them into her mouth, he would come out of his hiding place swooping, snatching, plundering like a hawk. Nothing escaped him.

From childhood, my brother proved forceful and bold. Perhaps he inherited that entirely from his mother, for in this they were of one substance, and that caused her a great deal of trouble. I on the other hand, as I grew older inclined toward calm and contemplation and acquired many of my father's traits, but with an inner volcano in my depths—which was my mother—now active now dormant by turns and in cycles, like Vesuvius.

When we were small my brother and I were put into the same bed, because the houses we lived in were limited in space. When winter came, we tussled all night long for the blanket. The first I knew, my brother had forcefully pulled the whole blanket over himself, leaving me uncovered. Soon, however, thanks to his violent, nervous twisting, the blanket would slip off his body. The result was that we both fell victims to the illnesses occasioned by the cold. This led our parents to a strange invention, to our lasting discomfort. Out of the blankets they fashioned a cover in the shape of two bags like the

sacks that unginned cotton is kept in. They inserted each of us into a sack, body and arms included, so that only the head stuck out; then round the neck they would pull a tape similar to the waistband on a pair of drawers; finally they would throw the two sacks on to the bed, there to remain, with us motionless inside, until morning.

I used to get into my sack each night suppressing my hurt and annoyance, but my brother suppressed nothing. His nature in this respect also was like his mother's and the opposite of my father's. He shouted, protested, swore, cursed, resisted, refused to get into his sack. And our parents kept soothing and beguiling him in various ways until he calmed down and relented.

He had a way of yelling and bawling from the start of the day that sometimes alarmed our parents and sometimes made them laugh, ending with their giving way to him in either case. He and I would be guilty of the same naughtiness, such as climbing together the neighbors' wall to steal a lemon off a tree, or throwing some missiles at each other that might break a pane of glass. My father would then produce the instrument not unlike a loosely strung bow which with a twist would immobilize our feet for the bastinado. I would submit to the punishment. But when my brother's turn came he would yell, go into a fit, weep, and curse, driving my father either to distraction or to laughter so that his seriousness of purpose was dissipated and he would have to let him off and go his way.

Ours was not on the whole a spoilt childhood. I do not remember that I ever got a toy from my parents except once, when my father walked in with a small tin locomotive the size of a finger, of a kind that used to be sold in the street for half a piaster. He presented it to me saying proudly, "Take it and play, boy!" I did not get much

enjoyment out of it for it was very slight and could move only if pushed by hand; it could not be wound with a key, nor did its colors dazzle the eye.

We knew nothing of what is now called a birthday, which our children and grandchildren insist on celebrating, demanding sweets and candles and presents and the sending out of invitations. We neither remembered nor even knew the dates of our birth. We did not give, nor did anyone else give, such importance to our lives or to the dates of our existence. The only days about which we sensed something new were the days of the Major and Minor Feasts,[32] for we used to get five piasters as a special present. For my part, I was content to play with the coins during the days of the feast, and then return them to my parents unspent.

But the coming of the Feast was our one opportunity of buying new clothes that were to do for the rest of the year. We used to be taken to a shop called Mayer, then to another known as Staben. There the struggle and conflict would start. For my father would start by reading the price tags, then launch into praise and acclaim for the cheapest items. We, however, turned our eyes right away to what seemed to us attractive, and—lo and behold!—these were the expensive items. But who paid any attention to us? Our father would give the salesman some imperceptible signal, he would quickly parcel up what he had chosen for us, and we would be on our way willy-nilly.

There followed another phase which is clearer in my mind, a strange phase the true nature of which I do not know to this day, a phenomenon for which I can find no satisfactory explanation. I used to contract a fever that confined me to bed for about three days whenever my eyes fell on a funeral procession in the street. My parents got to know of this, so they were careful to shield me from

such sights. One day, I was with my grandmother in a carriage taking us back home from the market. I was entirely well and happy when unexpectedly a funeral procession crossed a street far away. My grandmother spotted it, and hurriedly whispered to the coachman to turn away from that street. The poor woman thought she had succeeded in saving me from the fever that time, but she felt me shake and saw my face turn pale and break into a sweat, so she realized that I had seen the funeral at the same time as she had, that the fever had spread through my body, and there was no more to be done.

What connection is there between something external and immaterial like the sight of a funeral procession and a prompt affliction with a material, physical illness like a fever? The question did not arise in anyone's mind. My family were content to treat the fever with salt and vinegar compresses and the like until I recovered, only for the illness to recur for the same reason, and the same treatment to be repeated. Is it I wonder the story of the angel of death which Goethe related in one of his magnificent poems? He told of a child clinging to his father's breast asking to be protected from a mysterious voice that tempted him with wonderful presents and toys and flowers if he were to go to it and follow it. The father took his son's words to be childish nonsense, but by the time he reached his threshold the child had parted with life.

Can it be that children in their angelic purity hear the footfalls of the angel of death? I recall from my childhood days another strange occurrence that befell a gentle, delicate little girl who was my paternal aunt, the daughter of my grandfather's cultured wife. We had gone again to the estate in Saft al-Muluk one summer, relations having become cordial between that wife and my mother. Her children—my paternal uncles and aunts—were close to

me in age, so we used to spend the day playing near a derelict water-wheel by a field of sugar-cane and maize. We would be hunting birds and running behind a wagtail, but that beautiful child who was my aunt used positively to compel us to play one game, always the same: she used to fall to the ground playing the part of a sick child, and then she would pretend to be dying. Not once did we play together without going through the act of death! I remember that my heart suffered great anguish during this game. We then left and parted from the child-aunt, but before a year had passed I heard people say that she had died.

Regarding what happened to me, I believe that I was the locus of a fierce battle between two forces, the force of death and the force of life. The war between them had its ups and downs, but my body used to flag, exhausted and fevered, on the scene of that hidden struggle.

The life force won; the days of childhood passed away; the intellect lowered its thick curtain over the limpidity of the soul, so that it no longer heard the footfalls of the angel of death. The sight of funeral processions no longer disturbed me, so I was rid of the fever. But another disease began to grow in me with the growth of the intellect. It is anxiety.[33] I have never been able to find release from it. Even when I find no justification for any anxiety, it suddenly springs up of its own accord. I am its prisoner for all eternity, and know of no explanation for it.

Something else for which I have no explanation is the fact that I used sometimes to make semi-prophetic utterances. We were at one time living in a house overlooking the railway in a small provincial town. On a certain day and at a certain hour, a train passed by—one of the many that passed by day by day and hour by hour. But at the

time I pointed to that particular train and cried out apropos of nothing, "My grandmother is on this train!" No one had mentioned her or expected her to come, for she had been staying for many long months with her elder daughter in Alexandria. Yet within moments my grandmother was walking in with her suitcase.

On another day, we received a telegram saying that one of my aged uncles, called Mahmud, had died. Unlike my father, he had had no schooling but went into agriculture right away, and had rented for five years the land that my mother had bought. My father and mother were upset at the news. They put on black mourning clothes to receive condolences, and bags were packed for my father's journey. But, it is said, I laughed and cried out to them, "Don't go! He is not dead." A few hours later that same uncle walked in carrying a large basket containing eggs, cheese, and pigeons cooked in sealed claypots, with rice in peasant style. It turned out that an error had slipped into the telegram. The telegraphist had transmitted 'died' for 'is coming', not unlike it in the Arabic script. Errors were common in telegrams in those days, for the telegraph had been only recently introduced, and the employees not fully trained.

My family asserted later that they used to wonder at such occurrences. I of course saw nothing to wonder at in what I was doing.

5

I do not believe I was different from other children at this age, that is to say coming up to ten. I have tried to take memory back to the borderlines of this region in order to find out if I had any perception of beauty or sensation of love. It seems to me that I did experience something of the kind, in an obscure way of course. I fancy that I had a special feeling for a girl of my age or a little younger. I remember that she had blond hair. She was the daughter of one of the provincial families with which we exchanged visits. I used to dream at night of this little blonde! I was eager to meet her and play with her, and experienced choked anger, regret, sorrow, dejection when I detected in her an interest in other children, whereas I felt a rush of happiness if she came toward me and gave me precedence over others in playing with her.

Again, a girl of ten was brought from the countryside to work as our maid. I peered into her face and found it fine featured, bronze colored. I do not know what happened to my little heart then. All I know is that an obscure propensity drew me to this delicate girl, so that I had a special sympathy for her and shielded her from any who angered her or scolded her—until one day she went out of my life. It seems that her family came without my knowledge and took her away. I sorrowed a great deal over her departure.

At that stage I used to go to the Qur'anic school in whatever little town we resided in. I must have been sent to one at a very early age, for I have a vague impression of my urgent, pressing need to urinate or defecate, but fear of the palm branch in the hand of the shaykh who taught us the Scriptures overwhelmed me and tied my tongue to the extent that I could not express my need, so that I went back home every day having soiled my drawers.

When I was a little older and we settled in a small town—Disuq, as I remember—I joined its one big school, which was the school of the Islamic Benevolent Society. There was no State school there at the time. It was there that I began to decipher the alphabet.

My father was the town judge. Between the house we occupied and the school was a stretch of open ground which the school used as a yard in which the pupils' parade lines were formed. I shall not forget the day we were standing in rows for the morning parade under the headmaster s eye when a man passed before us whom the headmaster greeted with respect, then addressed the ranks with *salam 'al*—the Turkish word of command in use then—whereupon the entire school pounded the ground with their feet, and hands were raised to fezzes in

salute. The man so honored by the headmaster and the school was none but my father, who happened to come out of the house at the time of the parade, and so occasioned this show of respect. He *was* the town judge . . . .

My feeling at the time was a mixture of a little inner pride and a great deal of diffidence and embarrassment. I wished I could disappear into the belly of the earth, and wanted the pupils to be ignorant of any connection I had with this man to whom they had given a formal salute. Had it occurred to the headmaster at that moment to pull me out of the ranks and place me next to my father before the assembled parade, I would undoubtedly have passed out.

I have no explanation for this feeling, but I still carry an impression of it. This is why I was not much surprised when something similar happened to my son. He came home to relate that a teacher had called him out of the body of the class, put him up on the dais, and stood next to him delivering a long, long lecture in praise of his father, who had just received a State literary honor. I wanted to know what my son, who was also ten years old, had felt. He was too shy to tell me to my face, but I found out that he had been extremely annoyed. He was not disturbed or embarrassed or scared as I had been—this is what is distinctive about the present generation. But during the teacher's speech he was saying to himself, "What have I to do with this?" He did not feel that the matter involved him at all, until the teacher ended his long oration with, "May the son be like his father!" whereupon his malicious classmates shouted, "He's no good in Arabic!" And from behind the teacher's back he signaled to them with his clenched fist: Wait till we get out for our break!

His sentiments had not changed when he was a little older. He went on being annoyed whenever attention was drawn to him because of his father.

I do not remember exactly when I first responded to artistic beauty. Perhaps the first manifestation was over the fine chanting of the Qur'an when I was in the country in Abu Mas'ud. A shaykh had been engaged to make me memorize the Scriptures and to teach me the elements of reading and writing. That was in the summer when we used to leave the cities and their schools, and there was no Qur'anic school in the village at the time. But the shaykh who was engaged had a beautiful voice. He used to spend an hour teaching me and making me memorize, and another hour chanting the Scriptures. He also used to intone the call to prayer in the prayer ground by the canal.[34] The admiration expressed on all sides for this shaykh's voice stimulated imitation, so I used to learn the verses he gave me to memorize with the aim of chanting them like him in a beautiful voice. It seems that I did have such a voice, for I heard people praise and commend it, and that made me all the more eager to recite and to chant. For the first time I felt deep within me something akin to artistic pleasure.

It was this shaykh's custom to sleep under an acacia by the canal at siesta time. When he awoke to call the afternoon prayer, he used to rub his face with the palms of his hands while repeating the basic creed[35] with his eyes still shut. My younger brother noticed this, and with his natural bent for malicious practical jokes he lay in wait until the shaykh was deep in sleep with his hands at his sides, and he fetched from the canal two lumps of mud with which he filled his hands. When the shaykh awoke in time for the afternoon prayer and rubbed his face as usual it was soiled with mud, to the amusement of those

who were present. The shaykh stood up, furious and full of curses, inveighing against the disrespect and tomfoolery of the young and the mockery of the inhabitants of the estate, and he swore that he would not spend so much as another night on it. So I lost the first source of my artistic awareness.

My next artistic experience took a different form, namely the *mulid* of Sidi Ibrahim al-Disuqi,[36] including the procession which passed under our windows, starting with the *khalifa* on horseback and with drawn sword, surrounded by multi-colored banners, flags, pennants, and standards, by big drums and pipes of all sizes, and followed by a large number of carts drawn by animals of all kinds—horses and mules and donkeys and cows and water buffaloes and bulls—each cart representing a particular trade with all its appurtenances and with members of the guild on it: the blacksmiths had a forge and an anvil which they beat with their hammers to exemplify their work, then would come the carpenters with their saws, the masons with their trowels, the potters with their water pots and jugs, the tinsmiths with their mugs and Ramadan lanterns—each acting his part in daily life; even the fruit merchants had their cart, on which they had set up tree branches with apples and oranges hanging on them. It was a kind of unsophisticated carnival, but the impression it left on me at that age was wonderful, indescribable.

Yet the beginning of my genuine interest in art in its direct manifestation was the day that Shaykh Salama Higazi's troupe[37] came to Disuq—or, more likely, it was one of the companies that imitated his, took his plays on circuit, and borrowed his name when touring the countryside.

A wooden stage was erected for this company in one of the open spaces of the town. It was roofed and enclosed

with the heavy canvas covered with geometric appliqué designs of which temporary pavilions were usually made, and on this ornaments were put up and gas 'globes' were hung. The members of the troupe dressed as characters of *The Martyrs of Love*—that is to say, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the text being advertized as 'studded with unimaginable poems and songs'—and from morning they were parading in the streets in these ornate costumes, their blond wigs dangling onto their shoulders, topped with the hats of a bygone age adorned with long feathers, with daggers and swords protruding from their belts. Boys and youths ran after them, tradesmen abandoned their work and their shops, crowds stood in ranks to look at them, and the secluded women watched from behind their windows. Their was no topic of conversation in the whole town other than the arrival of Shaykh Salama's troupe.

The district chief of police and his assistants, the court and the prosecution all attended, and the best seats were reserved for them. Of course my father went to a performance one evening, and he took me with him after much hesitation. He was apprehensive about the effect of the late night on me. Were it not that his assistants in the court used to take their children and that he heard them ask, "Why don't you bring your children to watch?" he would never have thought of taking me on such an outing.

I shall never forget that night. The curtain rose on the entire company in their dazzling, bright costumes standing in rows, men and women, to sing the opening number. Then they scattered and the acting began.

Of course I did not understand much of the play. What interested me and captivated me was the swordfights. And the first thing I did the next day was break the handle of a broom and make a sword of it, and challenge a

servant we had to a duel. On the subject of brooms, Halley's famous comet appeared in the sky at about that time,[38] and my parents used to go up to the roof at night to watch it. I went up with them one night and asked them about it. They pointed to the sky and said, "It's that star that has a tail like a broomhead"—a broom like the one we had adopted as a sword!

The servant with whom I used to fight duels with a broom handle used to go of an evening to a café where there was a folk-poet who told the story of Abu Zayd al-Hilali, Diyab the son of Ghanim, and al-Safira 'Aziza.[39] He also found delight in holding up a long piece of wood and shouting, "I am Abu Zayd al-Hilali, and you are al-Zanati Khalifa!" He would then recount to me what he had heard from the folk-poet the evening before. These stories attracted me, and we would spend the whole afternoon acting them and duelling.

Yet it was a different situation that made me truly live stories with all my perceptions, and in a deeper way. It was my mother's long illness, which forced her to kill time by reading stories from *The Arabian Nights*, *'Antar*, *Hamza al-Bahlawan*, *Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan*, and the like. These came in long installments, and as soon as she had read one she would pass it on to us as we gathered round her bed. This delighted her. And she was good at telling the stories, leaving no detail without trying to picture it. My grandmother and I used to sit at her feet all ears. Sometimes my father joined us when he was through with the study of his cases, as if he had caught the infection from us. And when the narration ended with the heroes of the story in a situation that made us only the more eager for the continuation, my mother would say, "Wait until I read the next part." She would then leave us as if on hot embers.

She was not content with mere narration, but added comments of her own to bring the characters closer to our understanding. She would say, for example, that this kindly personage resembled So-and-So, a similarly favored relative or acquaintance of ours, or that that other evil character was like a particular man or woman known in our circle, so that in my imagination I used to attribute to the heroes of these tales the faces and general appearances of people I knew in real life.

As she came to the end of these folk epics in their cheap, distorted printed versions, there began to appear on the market European novels translated by Syrians who knew languages well, having been formed in the missionary schools. My mother acquired a taste for these too, and retold them to us as she had done with the earlier texts. To her, therefore, must go great and undeniable credit for having sharpened my imagination from an early date.

This practice of hers lasted until she recovered her health and left her sick bed. Thereafter she turned her attention to the question of her income and busied herself with problems concerning the land she had bought.

But by then I had begun to read, and with no alternative but to depend on myself, I took to searching for the tales and novels that I had seen in my mother's hands, extracting them from cases where things no longer in use were stored, and rushing through them, making out one word and missing out on another. Perhaps this is what helped me to acquire a good knowledge of written Arabic even before benefiting from regular schooling.

The fact is that my father's repeated transfers from one provincial town to another year after year prevented me from staying in any one school for an entire academic year. My father covered the entire map of Egypt in the

space of a few years. He might even pass by the same town repeatedly, once as prosecuting associate, once as agent, once as judge, and so on. In most of these towns there were no State schools at all, only Qur'anic schools of low or high standard, or private schools such as those run by the Islamic Benevolent Society or the Coptic community and the like. I went through them all, either hurriedly or at leisure according to circumstances.

Things did not settle down for me until my father was given a long-term appointment as a judge in Cairo. It now became possible for me to join a State school. I was by then over ten. My father was advised to apply for me to be admitted straight into second year primary. He did so apply to the Muhammad 'Ali Primary school in the Sayyida Zaynab quarter of Cairo, but the school ruled that I should take an entrance examination.[40] I did, and was found to be outstanding in Arabic, but I was taken by surprise when tested on geography, and asked about such things as 'isthmus' and 'archipelago.' About these I was totally ignorant. So it was decreed that I must start at the bottom and enroll in the first year since that was where that science was taught. The decision was a blow to me.

So it was that I entered the State school system at the first year level, although I was in greater need than others to make up for the years wasted outside the system. My father had rented a dwelling in the street of al-Khalig al-Misri, and I used to cut through to the school through a long, narrow street. From that time on, I was a 'regular' pupil—and, in my first year, a diligent one. For I was attracted to a subject I had not touched before, but which I felt was close to my inner self—that self that was fascinated by one particular thing the nature of which was unknown to me then, but which I later learned was art or, say, the artistic vocation.

This new object of attachment for me was drawing. I loved it, and tried to shine at it. It filled me with a strange inner joy, the same joy as I felt when beautifully reciting the Qur'an. I did not, however, sustain a serious interest in drawing. I had merely fallen in with the call of a mysterious voice, turning instinctively to the nearest outlet for a tendency latent in the depths of my being. It was a tendency that readily moved, as if pulled by a magnet, toward any opportune arrangement congenial to it, as if it were the soul of a ghost probing bodies to find the one in which it was destined to be incarnated.

What is the source of this deeply buried tendency which has dominated my existence since early days, which required for its realization greater talents than I had, and demanded of me exertions from which I falter? Am I alone responsible for bringing it into being? Is it a seed I received from my father and my mother, one which by force of circumstance failed to germinate in them so that they unconsciously burdened me with its exigencies through some hidden code they deposited into the genetic drop out of which I was fashioned? I do not wish to rush the answer. I am content to put forward these details about my father's and my mother's characteristics, in the hope of finding the starting point for an answer.

I did not long apply myself to drawing as a hobby because at the time something else loomed on my horizon: music.

My family had become acquainted with a company of female entertainers who performed at weddings. This happened on the occasion of the marriage of a paternal uncle of mine called 'Ali, years ago when I was eight or nine. He had advanced to the position of chief of police in the town of Shibin al-Kawm. He had had his fill of the frivolous, gay life of a bachelor, and had lost touch with

the usual milieus that provided amusement at the time. He now wanted to marry.

He resorted to my mother to find him a bride. The one condition he set—contrary to my father's—was that she should be rich, even if she was an old monkey! She searched, and found the answer to his prayers: a lady of nearly fifty, one of the Turkish 'white slaves,'[41] owning a hundred acres of the best agricultural land.

This marriage proved a windfall for me and my younger brother, for my uncle was so carried away with the prospect of wealth devolving to him that he never entered our house without presents of sweets, fruit, or the like. When the wedding day was near, he came in with great gifts for my brother and me: a tricycle and a toy gun with all attachments. We therefore blessed this marriage and rejoiced at it.

But for me in particular, the really important occurrence in connection with the wedding celebration was something else. The bride insisted that the entertainment at her wedding be provided by a company from Cairo, not from a small town like Shibin al-Kawm. That, in her eyes, was what was worthy of her status!

The groom's (also my father's) younger brother was therefore delegated to go to Cairo, negotiate with a company of entertainers, and bring them to Shibin. And I went with him. I cannot remember precisely how I came to accompany him. Who delegated me? Was it I who made the request and could not be shaken off? Or did my parents send me of their own accord?

All I recall is that I went to Cairo with this youngest uncle of mine. We had a long walk along Muhammad 'Ali Street, stopping at every second step at some small, narrow shop displaying musical instruments—lutes, tambourines, drums—hung on its walls. My uncle had

long, interminable dicussions with the shopowners while I stood round, fidgeting with exasperation. Our journey ended at a last shop, where agreement was reached over something or other. I learned later that these were the premises of so-called 'delighters,' whose function it was to provide entertainers for weddings.

That was what I saw, and that was all we did then. We returned the same day to Shibin al-Kawm, and I saw no women, no performers until the day of the wedding. And on that memorable day, I was included in the delegation charged with bringing the bride from her town to ours. That made a picture I shall not forget.

We rode in a special railway coach attached to the rear of the train. This was known as a private 'salon,' which the railway administration at the time used to rent out for big weddings. Our bride, proud of her wealth, insisted that her journey to Shibin al-Kawm be in such a 'salon' in which guests—ladies and members of both families—would also ride. I do not know what got me into that unlikely company, but I did travel in the 'salon' and we got to Shibin al-Kawm safe and sound.

And then all hell broke loose! I heard a hubbub, a tumult, a hullabaloo that filled the station. It was the bride, God bless her! She had barely stepped off the train and looked around when she shouted, "Where is the military band?" And she absolutely refused to take one step out of the station unless the brass band marched ahead of the bridal carriage with its horses adorned with roses. No one had thought of that or made arrangements for it, as the bride was not a young woman, nor was this her first wedding—in fact, she had been married several times before. But her Turkish brain could not tolerate the idea that her procession should go through the streets of the city without the military band. People crowded in to

kiss the bride's hand, pleading and entreating her to forgive this sin of omission, to get into the carriage, and make her way calmly to the groom's house in order to avert a scandal and avoid having passers-by and busybodies crowd in on them. She did at last ride and move in procession with them, all the time abusing them in Turkish, and they cursing her under their breath in Arabic!

By sunset, the band of women performers had arrived. I heard one or two pieces by them before I was overcome by drowsiness, and I fell asleep before witnessing the actual wedding.

But in the course of the festivities, a personal relationship had been established between my mother and grandmother on the one hand, and Mistress Hamida, the lute-player, singer, and leading entertainer on the other. She was a congenial person, a pleasing companion, and a generous soul even though not much to look at. And she sensed a rapport with my mother and grandmother that made her say in her amiable way that "they alone were human beings, unlike the wedding hosts and that calamity of a bride."

My mother invited her and her band to visit us, and before the year was out—when we went to Alexandria for the summer as usual, for my mother could not stay away from her native city—Mistress Hamida came to us with some of the members of the band who were closest to her. She came as a fully honored and respected guest, but she was far from mean and did not grudge us her songs and solos on the lute. Her visits became even more frequent when we moved to Cairo a few years later; and when my grandmother was afflicted with semiparalysis and the doctor counseled that she be afforded peace of mind and cheeriness, Mistress Hamida took charge of her whenever she was not working, so there was scarcely a

week when she did not spend one or two nights with us until the 'delighter' called her away to perform at a party or a wedding.

Her singing moved me, and I learned many of the songs she used to sing. My admiration grew to the point when I imagined she was beautiful, and I felt for her an emotion that was almost like love. And she encouraged me to sing with her, asserting that I had a talent for picking tunes from her as I heard them. One day I came home from school—the Muhammad 'Ali Primary school, where I was in my first year—and I found her at home playing the lute. She was alone in the room, so I asked her to teach me to play. She did set out to teach me the *bashraf*[42] prelude, and before long my hand was able to coax out of the strings a melody not out of keeping with this prelude.

My mother walked in on us, assuming that the lute was in the hands of the professional. When she saw that I was clutching the instrument and bringing harmonious notes out of it, she gave a thunderous shout of anger and bore down on me to snatch away the lute yelling, "If your father gets to know about this, he will slaughter you!" She kept repeating that if I touched the lute one more time, I would never succeed in schoolwork and I would have no future other than to become a 'songmonger.' She forced me to swear by Sidi al-Bistami—the oath beyond which was no oath—that I would not touch a lute with my hand for the rest of my life. I took the oath and have kept it. But that did not prevent me from learning melodies and songs, including complicated old tunes that even Mistress Hamida had difficulty in performing, such as those of 'Abduh al-Hamuli.[43]

My mother was particularly fond of al-Hamuli's compositions, and she used to tell us a great deal about

him. She maintained that his song *Swing in your Walk, Pretty One* had been specially composed for her on the occasion of her wedding. The story behind this was that, according to her, al-Hamuli had a close relationship with my grandfather, her father Sulayman al-Bistami.[44] It started one day when, coming out of his house, her father saw a horse-drawn carriage in which was a man who seemed ill, leaning on cushions. The carriage stood in front of a locked-up house opposite. At noon, her father came back from his work at the harbor and found the carriage still standing at the same place, and the sick man still in it. Intrigued, he went forward to inquire and learned that it was 'Abduh al-Hamuli, and that he had a severe liver disease. He had come to Alexandria for the summer and had rented the locked house, and now people were trying to find the key and the absent landlord. Without hesitation her father introduced himself, invited him to his house and lodged him in the reception room, which was the part of the house secluded from the rest, set apart for male guests and visitors.[45] There he attended to his needs personally, and would not allow him to be moved to the rented house while he was so ill and in need of attention and care.

This grandfather of mine, my mother used to say, was different from the rest of his kinsfolk, who were men of the sea. Again and again she told me of his love of books, of his valuable library which my grandmother, out of ignorance, disposed of for a song after his death, of his connection and friendship with the learned linguist Shaykh Hamza Fath Allah[46] (who was also the husband of one of my mother's maternal aunts), and of his love of the musical arts, which was manifested in his nursing the friendship of 'Si 'Abduh,' as al-Hamuli used to be called.

This friendship grew and developed, so that the great singer's visits never ceased, even after the death of his friend, my grandfather. His loyalty was such that he never failed to inquire about the family whenever he came to Alexandria, asking about his friend's little orphaned daughter, lifting her in his arms and kissing her. He kept this up until my grandmother married, when her husband, because of his contempt for art and artists, shut the door in the singer's face. He therefore faded out of the family's life, and reappeared only on the day of my mother's wedding. He deemed this a duty to the memory of his departed friend who had valued him at his true worth.

6

Nothing of importance clings to my memory concerning my first year in primary school, except an incident occasioned by a classmate who used to play with me during the weekly day of rest. One Friday he came to our house in al-Khalig al-Misri Street carrying a large broken loudspeaker from an old phonograph. We played with it for an hour, then my father, leaning on his stick, came upon us on his way out. When he saw my classmate, who was younger than I, he asked him, "Are you in the same class as this boy Tawfiq?" He answered yes. My father then asked him if I was hardworking. What did that classmate and friend of mine, with whom I had been playing peaceably and happily a moment earlier, do but say quite simply, "He is a dunce!" Then he added, "But I am clever."

The next I knew my father's stick had been raised and was about to descend on my body without any inquiry or verification, so I ran away and hid under my bed. My father pursued me, stick in hand, shouting, "You failure! You idler! By God, I'll show you!" His cries were heard in the house, so my mother and grandmother came inquiring what had happened. Clearing them out of his way, my father said, "The boy is a dunce. He's no good at school. The other boy who's younger is doing well, but he is a failure." He bent down and reached for me with his stick under the bed. I could see the tip of the stick coming for me, and managed to elude it while trembling with fear. I shed not a tear and uttered not a gasp, for terror and consternation had petrified all other sensations. I did not cry until my father had gone away after my grandmother had spoken in my defense and led him by the stick out of the room. I cried not out of pain, for I had not been beaten, but out of a sense of injustice.

Came the year's final examination for promotion to the second year, and I passed with honors and was advanced, whereas that classmate had failed and had to repeat. My father was surprised, and he acknowledged that he had been unfair to me that day.

I progressed well in my second year and, until the middle of the year, seemed to be heading for honors, but then we moved from the house in al-Khalig al-Misri Street to another in New Hilmiyya. Consequently I was transferred from the Muhammad 'Ali School to the Muhammadiyya School because it was nearer our new home. At this point everything in my school life went wrong, for the two schools were out of step with each other. Especially in arithmetic, I found myself faced with problems of a new kind of which I had no experience. The school was ahead of the curriculum. I used to sit staring

at the blackboard without understanding a thing. Lessons followed one another and I remained in ignorance. Ignorance piled up on ignorance. I was falling back quickly, and this caused me to feel great bitterness and pain.

Of course I did not dare confide in my parents, for they had never accustomed me to speaking frankly about my concerns. I knew in advance their reaction to any weakness in me: reproof and the threat of the cane. I was afraid to tell them that I could not follow the lessons lest I hear their usual shout: "Because you are a dunce! Because you play!"

Enviously, I used to look round my classmates, who zestfully raised their hands and gave correct answers to those riddles about tough mathematical problems, whereas I shrank on my seat in abasement and apprehension lest the teacher should notice that my hand was hiding under the desk. I tried asking one of my able classmates to explain to me what I had not understood, but he could not do it because the gap between what I knew and what the others had reached was wider than ever. I did not dare ask the teacher, in order not to reveal the extent of my ignorance. I was, truly this time, the dunce in the class.

I was heading for certain failure in the final examination had not God's providence saved me in the nick of time: my father was transferred to Damanhur, and I was consequently moved to Damanhur's primary school. In such a provincial town it was natural for a relationship to be established between its judge and the headmaster of its school. When, after noticing for himself how far behind I was, the headmaster heard of my multiple moves from school to school in a single year, he advised my father to get one of the teachers in the school to give me private tuition at home after school hours to enable me to

keep up with the work of the class. This was done, and it was my salvation. I was back to excellence, and recovered my self-confidence and high morale. At the end of the year I passed the final examination and was promoted to the third year. I progressed in my studies naturally and well.

For all the black memories associated with the Muhammadiyya school in Cairo, it had another facet the benefits of which I shall not forget. Among my classmates was a pupil of about my age whom I befriended because he told me at length about the theaters he used to frequent. I remember that he told me, with details that astonished me, of a play in which there was a semblance of the fire of Hell, with its flames and its devils appearing in a scene that he kept describing while I stood open-mouthed like an idiot. He said, as I recall, that it was *Télémaque* performed by the Salama Higazi troupe. He also told me of another performance by the same troupe: it was *Othello*, with songs and poems as it was presented in those days.[47] I do not know whether he went to these on his own or with his parents, or where he got the money from. All I know is that he used to tell me every Saturday about the play he had seen on the Friday evening.

He once invited me to go with him, but I dared not ask permission of my parents, for I knew what the outcome would be. I did, however, pick up courage one Friday and ask them to take me to see Shaykh Salama, so that I should be able to discuss with my friend what I also had seen, for I was at a stage when I could understand Shaykh Salama's acting and appreciate his songs and poems better than I could in Disuq several years earlier. I had my way. My mother took me, along with my grandmother, to see *The Martyrs of Love* one evening. I followed it well, and heard Shaykh Salama sing his famous poem, *O Juliet, What Si-*

lence is This? But the shaykh was limping a little on stage and leaning on a chair, for he was suffering semiparalysis.

In Damanhur, on the other hand, we were far from any show, cut off from all art. For me, this ushered the stage of true reading and immersion in narratives on a wide scale. I took to devouring anything that came to hand, good or bad. I was past the stage of limping in reading, when the meaning of many words had escaped me. One of these was the word *nass*, 'text.' Since Arabic is not fully vocalized, I read it as *nuss*, the colloquial form of classical *nisf*, 'half.' So when I came across a story the key of which lay in a letter that was to reveal the dreadful secret, and this was introduced with "Here is the text of the letter," I boiled with annoyance, asking, "Why half the letter? We want the whole of it, not half!"

By the time we went to Damanhur, however, I had a fair command of the language. Anyway, our eagerness to read stories had the advantage of teaching us language and composition in the most direct and enjoyable way, for whatever the value of these stories their style—especially such as were translated by those Syrians who were well grounded in the language—was not without some dignity, clarity, and brilliance.

But my father did not approve of such reading, and never encouraged it. Woe to me if he spotted one such novel in my hand! He favored something else. I remember an incident dating from before I joined regular State schooling. It was a Friday. My father was in the loose robe he wore at home. He had had his breakfast and read his newspaper and could find nothing else to do, so he called out to me, "Come, let me test you. Bring me the seven *mu'allaqat*." That was the collection of pre-Islamic poems that he loved, and lines from which he used to chant to himself. He looked up the *mu'allaqa* of Zuhayr ibn Abi

Sulma, and asked me to read it aloud. When I got to the lines He who does not compromise in many matters/Is ground by molars and trodden underfoot,' he asked me what compromise' meant and I could not find the right answer—and who at that age and in those days knew the true import of compromising in life when he knew nothing of life itself or of the interrelationship of people in this complicated, interwoven society? When I could not give him an answer that satisfied him, he raised his hand and dealt me a slap that made my nose bleed. At the sound my grandmother, who was fond of me, came in, shouted at him, and drew me by the hand out of the room, as I cursed the *mu'allaqat*, their authors, and even the whole of poetry!

It would have been natural and logical for me to have loved poetry as my father did, but my nosebleed made me hate it for a long time—how could I love it then when blood had been shed between us?

I hated poetry at that stage just as I hated swimming, again because of my father. The reason for my hatred of swimming was that he determined to teach me how to swim one summer in Alexandria, and all he did was to pull me by the hand to where he was swimming, which was in deep water, all at once. I probed for the bottom with my foot and could not reach it, so I panicked, and whenever a wave came by I felt as if it was about to wrench me off and cast me away from my father. Alexandria and its suburbs at the time had nothing of what is now called a 'plage,' crowded, regulated, and attended by lifeguards. There were only wild and semi-deserted stretches of sandy coastline. Even so, my father might have started by letting me toy with the water a little in a shallow spot, as happens with children nowadays: they are given colored buckets to play with near the water, so

a relationship of dalliance and interplay builds up between them and the sea. They approach it cautiously, put a distance between them and its rollers, and get used to meeting it gradually until familiarity is generated and they find themselves one day capable of swimming on its surface without fear or difficulty. I on the other hand knew the sea only as a wild beast whose waves were violently wrenching me and consigning me to the depths while I gritted my teeth and choked my cries so my father would not scold me.

All that was achieved was that I swore to myself this encounter would be the last, and that if I got out safely I would never again dip a foot in any sea. I did get out, and I have kept my oath: my feet have never made contact with the sea to this day. I might have loved both poetry and the sea from an early age if my father had taken me gently to the shores of either, instead of casting me to the depths.

My father did not appreciate that there is different material to suit different ages. Like most fathers in those days, he treated me as if I was the same age as himself. He imposed on me what reading he liked and esteemed. The simplest book he put into my hands was *The Twentieth-Century Emile* translated by one of his colleagues in the judiciary, 'Abd al-'Aziz Bey Muhammad, and the play *Faith* by the French dramatist Eugène Brieux,[48] also translated by a fellow judge, Salih Bey Gawdat, both translations having appeared at that time. Each of these colleagues had entrusted my father with dozens of copies of their books, seeking his assistance in their distribution, for there were then no publishers or publishing houses, and each author or translator printed and distributed by himself. I used to find many copies of these books that my father had not managed to dispose of, piled up in a corner

of a disused room. I did read those two books to please my father. I found them at least more bearable than the *mu'allaqat*!

When today I come across colored children's books containing religious or historical stories or legends and tales of imaginary adventure, when I find available to my son (at the age of six or seven or eight) stories of the prophets with drawings in color and couched in an attractive style, stories of the Pharaohs and the Greeks and the Arabs, the whole of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Swift's adventures, *Robinson Crusoe*, the fables of Andersen and other readings that entertain and widen the imagination, all in simplified language easily absorbed, I envy this generation.

Similarly, I see young people reading novels, short stories, and plays without censorship or objection from their elders. On the contrary, they are advised to read and channeled toward such books on the premise that these are serious and respectable material. These genres have risen to the point of being revered both by those in authority and by parents. I envy these youths; I also demand of them that, since modern times have helped them and facilitated their task, they correlate the advantages received with greater excellence and superior mastery. They at least have not had to grope about in their reading, and have not encountered those anyone standing in the way of their natural intellectual advance.

When reading stories, I used to hide from my parents' eyes as if I was committing some crime, although the standard of both authorship and translation was mostly quite high. I used to sneak with my books to read under my bed. That bed had a cover that stretched down to the ground, concealing whoever went beneath like drawn curtains. But it also cut off the light. Sometimes I did not

care, and went on reading in the dark until I could no longer distinguish one line from another. I would then steal out and fetch a candle, and resume reading by its light.

So it went on until one day dinner time came round and my family kept calling me while I was engrossed in my reading. When eventually I became aware of their repeated summons, I came out from under the bed in a hurry, and in my confusion left the candle lit. While we were busy with our meal, a hubbub arose in the street and neighbors were calling out, "Fire, fire!" My mother was alarmed and wanted to get up and investigate, but my father made her sit down again, pacifying her with, "Don't panic! It is no doubt a fire in one of the small shops in the street. It is nothing unusual for the neighbors and the passers-by to make a fuss." But soon there was hammering at our door, and people shouting, "You have a fire, you have a fire!" My parents then had to take notice and they rose in panic and alarm, searching through the house, and there in the room in which I slept were smoke rising and flames blazing. Everybody joined in fighting the fire until it was put out. With his usual thoroughness and precision, my father kept investigating the source of the fire, questioning and inquiring, while I cowered unobtrusively, not breathing a word!

We did not stay long in Damanhur itself, for my uncle Mahmud, who had rented my mother's land in Abu Mas'ud, passed away—he really died this time—after having usurped the rent during all the time he controlled the land, for he used to send in only enough to pay the mortgage installments and the bank interest. He was the true owner during that period. Woe betide my mother if she asked for a chicken or a goose or a tin of clarified butter. He made a show of annoyance and discontent if

we thought of going to the estate to spend a single week, and his wife never spoke of it except as her own, nearly driving my mother to distraction in her exasperation, she who could not bear anyone to touch her possessions. But what could she do when an elaborate letting contract was pointed at her head?

When word of the man's death reached her, she was sure that salvation had come. Off she went to her land to cultivate it herself, or to rent out small parcels of it, of not more than two or three acres each, to a number of cultivators. She swore binding oaths that she would not rent it out as one unit as long as she lived, and she was as good as her word. She did not trust anyone thereafter, not even her husband. She kept the reins in her hand and would not allow any living being to encroach on her authority. And she managed her affairs with all her strength of character and her organizing, planning, and management abilities.

She judged that the best way of managing the estate was to live on it. It included a small house, and there we moved. So it came about that for a long time we lived in the countryside. The distance between Abu Mas'ud and Damanhur was not more than ten kilometers, which the train of the Delta narrow-gauge railway covered in half an hour. I used to get up early in the morning, the dew actually settling on me, to catch the morning train to my school in Damanhur, and return by the evening train. Thursday was an exception, for we left the school at noon and there was no train at that time, so a donkey was sent for me and it carried me back to Abu Mas'ud in two hours.

This Delta railway was extremely dirty. Onto the train would get goats and sheep along with their owners, plus sacks, baskets of various sizes, ducks, geese, and chickens

with all their hubbub and clucking. There was only one secluded section, a compartment labeled first class, which was merely a part of a third-class coach and not very different from the rest. There was no second class—why, I do not know. Perhaps because in the countryside only two categories were recognized: the *fellah* and the 'human being' or 'clean' man.

To be a 'clean' man one did not have to be a chief of police or a judge or some kind of notable. It was enough to be a head watchman or vice-headman or telephone clerk, or anyone who showed some sign of enlightenment, being able to spread a newspaper in his hands, tilt his skull-cap rakishly, wear an ample clean robe, or be shod in shiny or loudly colored heavy leather slippers. For such, 'cleanness' was sufficient qualification for riding in the first class compartment, whether carrying a genuine first class ticket or a third class one. There was no objection from the ticket-collector: he shut his eyes in deference to 'cleanness' alone.

My father was not averse to riding first class on his way to and from court sessions in Damanhur, yet he did feel some constraint, not on his own behalf but for the sake of others riding with him in the same compartment. His mere presence prevented many of the 'clean' who were accustomed to the privilege from approaching it, out of deference and humility. He sensed that they were too embarrassed to sit next to the district judge, and so they left the place entirely to him.

One day, while my father was riding a hackney carriage in Damanhur from the station to the court, he turned his attention to the vehicle and ran his eye carefully over it. It was an old, rickety, worn down carriage, but holding together well enough to fulfill its humble function. Drawing it were two emaciated horses, one

white and one roan. The roan was smaller than the white, and next to it seemed to be leaning on it, clinging to it, sheltering under its shadow, as if but for its reliance on its companion it would collapse. The white may have been no better, for it also leaned on its companion, without being so obvious or making it apparent from its demeanor that it confessed its weakness—two horses collaborating for survival, each giving the other heart for bare life. It seemed that thev had even forgotten or pretended to forget that they needed food. They had their heads together in one nosebag, which the cabby asserted contained straw or dried clover or some dry herbage, but horses do not speak and would not give him the lie; they merely stuck their heads into that nosebag without moving. That was the only indication that they were eating.

As for the cabby, he was bald and hid his baldness under a large Mahalla kerchief, which he always tied round his head and never removed, summer or winter. He had a strange name which I remember even now: Khudargi al-Rumi, 'Greengrocer the Greek.'

My father knew his name, because the first questions he asked anyone he engaged in conversation were about his name, his life, andhis work, as if he were a defendant or a witness in court. So he initiated the following conversation:

"Listen, Khudargi: What is this carriage with the horses worth?"

"About eighteen pounds, Your Excellency."

"What would you say to my buying this carriage with its horses and you too for that sum?"

The cabby was puzzled how he could be included in the sale, but my father clarified his intention. He wanted to buy carriage and horses for that figure, but on condi-

tion the cabby also took up employment as his coachman. He would have a salary of two pounds a month which he would get in one lump at harvest time, and would live rent-free on the estate, in one of the peasant's dwellings that would be refitted for him and his family.

Khudargi al-Rumi accepted, and we became the owners of a carriage with two horses, which is what I described in *The Return of the Spirit*[49] as a stately private carriage with two noble steeds!

We now used this carriage in our movements between Abu Mas'ud and Damanhur, and dispensed with the Delta railway and with donkeys.

I cannot forget the sight of these two emaciated horses when let loose in a field of clover in spring, the season of delight for livestock. Luscious green food stretched out before them like a sea, and they seemed to be floating in happiness! They soon fattened and showed signs of health, except that they retained their comparative sizes, the roan remaining the shorter one, until a shorter creature came along. That was the young ass that my grandmother bought for me for a mere twenty piasters. As long as I stayed in the countryside, it also was kept, to its delight, in the field of clover, treated with honor and dignity. But the moment I turned my back and left it, saddle-bags of manure were strapped on it, and it was led abjectly with other donkeys to the hardest of labor and the dirtiest of tasks.

Life in the countryside was beautiful at this stage of my life, despite the sentiment that invaded me—vague at times, clear at others—about the indignity and abasement visited on the *fellah*. It was common to see around me *fellahs* kneeling down and stretching their necks next to their cattle to drink from the canal in the same fashion. I often did that myself beside them, for I had integrated

with them and was no longer aware that I was anything but one of them.[50]

I would have wished my life among them to be extended, were it not for an event that sent me away. I persisted in my reading of stories out there, at night under the faint light of an oil lamp in the room I shared with my grandmother and my younger brother, and during the day in any secluded spot in field or barn. One day I felt a pain in my right eye, but the story I was reading was thrilling, engrossing, and long, and drove me to read on despite the pain. But then my mother looked into my face and shouted in alarm: my eye was as red as a glass of blood, and full of pus. She took me immediately to Damanhur to the eye specialist, who said, "This is festering ophthalmia. It is a threat to the eye unless it is treated decisively and promptly, and the treatment may be protracted."

Because of this, we moved back into Damanhur. The doctor did his best to treat me with the medicine and methods then known—penicillin had unfortunately not been discovered—but the disease was refractory. My parents got worried, and the doctor did not deny that the eye was threatened with loss of vision. I heard him say it with my own ears to a lady visitor in his clinic, while he was bathing my eye—at least he did not say it explicitly, but in a way even more revealing. Looking at my face, the visitor said to him in a whisper that I nevertheless caught, "I think there is nothing to hope for in this eye, Doctor." I did not hear his answer, but I sensed that he was silencing her with a dig of the elbow.

It seems that despair was overtaking the doctor, for he now took to prescribing a succession of different measures, including calling on a barber to draw blood. A barber was called in—I remember his name to this day because of the

credit he earned in healing me: it was 'Ali al-Nawwam, 'the Sleeper.' He used leeches, but this did not help. The illness worsened. The doctor admitted that the eye was doomed unless a miracle occurred. He discussed whether my family could spend a whole night bathing my eye, minute by minute, with antiseptics. They debated a division of the vigil, though they doubted the ability of each to withstand weariness and sleepiness. Then the barber 'Ali the Sleeper came forward and volunteered to stay up all night to deal with the eye all by himself. And this is what happened. He stayed by my bedside, his hand never wearying of washing the eye minute by minute. He took away the cotton wad impregnated with boric acid only to apply another. I was aware all through the night of the movement of his hand, never flagging, never still, until it was morning. The doctor came in, looked at my face, and his own lightened: the danger had passed, recovery was possible. I had been saved by the barber 'Ali the Sleeper who had not slept a single moment that night!

It was fortunate that this illness occurred during the summer, in the course of the yearly break, after I had sat the examination and passed it. Had it happened during the school year, it would have been a cause of failure and I would have been held back for another year, for the illness and its treatment lasted about three months until the eye returned to its normal state. Even so it is still, to this day, weaker than the other.

7

The class I joined after my illness was the fourth primary, the year at the end of which is held the examination covering the whole of the primary stage. Although exhausted after my illness, I exerted a genuine effort in studying and learning, without the services of a private tutor. I excelled at both the languages taught—Arabic and English—to the extent of attracting the attention of the teachers. When marking the composition booklets, the teacher of English—who had been tutoring me privately the previous year—was surprised, and craftily asked me who was giving me private lessons now. When I denied that I was getting any he called me a liar, treated me shabbily, and made it his practice to embarrass me by asking me difficult questions, making me appear weak, and urging on me the need of private tuition as in the past.

For all that, he could not fail to acknowledge that the answers written in my exercise book were correct. I paid no attention to him, and put up with his annoyances without telling my parents.

The year ended and I presented myself for the primary school examination, which was held in Alexandria in a huge canvas pavilion in the school of Ras al-Tin.[51]

I was among the youngest candidates from Damanhur. Although, because of my late start in State schools, I could be considered somewhat old for this stage, I was young in comparison with pupils from rural areas, especially the sons of notables and village headmen. Most of these were twenty or older, and came to primary school sporting waxed mustaches, having married and sired children. Some of them had no compunction about dressing in the manner of village grandees, in broadcloth robes, woolen wraps, and shawls, and no one dared rebuke them.

The day I left Damanhur for Alexandria to sit the examination was not one to be forgotten. My father took me to the station with my case full of clothes and books, and bought me a third class ticket. The train came in, the third class coach pulled up by the platform—and it was packed with peasant men and women and others of that type. They had blocked doors and windows with their bundles, their baskets large and small, and their sacks, so that it was impossible to force a way into the coach through any of the doors. The porter who had been carrying my case lifted me up instead and threw me through the window into the middle of the coach, with my bag to follow. I landed on the heads of some women dressed in their rustic finery of black silk, and they shouted, their menfolk joining in with them, "What manners are these, Mister?" I got to my feet and apologized in

words that scarcely forced themselves out of my throat.

I hastened to the window to see my father, and spotted him waving goodbye to me from the platform. Then suddenly he rushed forward to the window to repeat the instructions he had given me. Immediately the train got to Alexandria, I was to take the tram to the quarter of Muharram Bey, to the house of his brother-in-law, where I was to lodge throughout the period of the examination.

On my own in a third-class coach, I never sat throughout the journey, except on my case, and had to put up with the abuse of the other passengers and their "Look out, Mister!" whenever a woman passed by me carrying a child that was bawling and urinating.

By God's good grace the train reached Alexandria. As soon as I was out in the streets of this great city and saw the throngs outside the 'cinematograph,' I lost my head. That particular picture-house was called 'The American Cosmograph.' The time was about three o'clock and people were going in for the afternoon show. Colored posters dazzled one's eyes .... A wonderful episode, all secrets and mysteries, from the adventures of the famous thief Zigomar .... God, how could someone like me, newly in from the countryside, resist? Satan the accursed tempted me to go in and see .... I was on my own, free as air .... My father I had left behind in Damanhur .... My aunt's husband did not know by what train or at what time I was coming (I did not know that my careful father had written to him when I was due) ....

Laboriously hauling my case, I approached the ticket window. I was asked, "Have you got a Poulain paper?" I did not understand. But a street vendor came forward and offered me, for half a piaster, part of the wrapping of a bar of chocolate of a make called Poulain. With this I could get a second class ticket at a reduced price. I bought

it, got a ticket for another piaster and a half, and attended the show.

What a delight! What happiness to be in a big city like Alexandria, alone, without anyone to watch you or call you to account!

The show ended at about six. I found the tram for Muharram Bey, and made for my relatives' house. When the household saw me, their agitation subsided and their alarm was stilled. Eagerly they asked, "By what train did you come?" I stuttered. They gave me to understand that my parents' letter told them I was due in by the three o'clock train. It was now six. Hesitantly and in confusion, I said, "There was a delay." My aunt's husband looked at me with suspicion and said, "Three hours, delay? Why? Did this train of yours kneel down like a camel and have a snooze on the way?"

The four days of written examinations passed without any hitches, and then came one day of orals. My answers were not bad, and there was no cause for serious concern in spite of the high level of knowledge then required.

We used to write compositions on demanding topics, not only in Arabic but also in English. After my graduation I looked over some old exercise books that had not gone astray, and I was greatly astonished how a fourth-year primary pupil was expected to write in such style in both languages. In Arabic, we knew and memorized poetry and prose to a level that now excites wonder among the rising generations. In geography we used to vie with each other in the drawing of colored maps of all the countries of the world, showing the products of each, its means of communications, its ports, its climate, its economic status. As for arithmetic—and I do not know how I passed that!—I stood until the day of the examination in terror of those riddle-like problems in which there

was a train running at a speed of so-and-so and another at such-and-such, or water hurtling from a tap into a drain with a capacity of this or that in so much time . . . . These trains and drains drove sleep from my eyes for hours and hours before the examination!

It is no wonder that obtaining the primary school certificate then was considered quite an event. People spoke of those who held it with awe and pride. After getting it, one might marry if one was so minded, or gain employment. It seems that there was complete reliance on this primary stage, for it was what supplied the government with the minor functionaries it needed, and that was all that the governments of the period wanted from education.

The results were posted, and the seat number by which I was identified was listed among the successes, whereas among the failures were many of my classmates from Damanhur who waxed their mustaches and sired children.

To move on to the secondary stage, I had to reside in Alexandria, and the family actually had to equip a house in the Ramleh part of Alexandria for the purpose. But their business in Damanhur and on the estate in Abu Mas'ud made it impossible for them to be with me all the time. When their concerns called them away, they used to leave a maid with me to see to my needs.

I joined first the Ras al-Tin Secondary School, then the 'Abbasiyya. Pride in my success in the primary examinations at the first attempt fostered in some measure a mood of recklessness, laxity, indifference, and neglect. Besides, my parents' absence every now and then opened out vistas for me. And there was the American Cosmograph with the serials and adventure sequences that overwhelmed me and robbed me of all sense of proportion.

For after the *Zigomar* series came episodes of *Fantomas*.[52] In addition, there were the *Rocambole*[53] stories, which could be 'rented' from bookshops. This renting of books and novels in return for a subscription was common in those days. This convenience allowed me to read novels falling into several volumes that I could not own. I had to pay only five piasters a month to become a subscriber, in order to borrow and read all twenty parts of a long novel like *Rocambole* or the novels of Alexandre Dumas Père.

In consequence, school work was neglected and piled up, until the end of the year came round, and I failed miserably in the examination on which depended promotion to the second year. My parents were extremely angry. They abominated the cinematograph and all its works, and banned me from it altogether; then they descended on the novels in my possession and ripped them to pieces.

I also was saddened and chagrined by my failure, but I did not feel the extent of the calamity or the weight of the blow until the beginning of the new session, when I could actually see my former classmates, some several years younger than I, in a higher grade while I was the failure left behind in the first, looking up to them in their heights as they were handed beautiful new books such as H.G. Wells' *Journey to the Moon*.[54] I kept stealing glances at those books and grieving. I had only the same old books. I the older pupil would be placed among the new, while my old classmates had risen—it seemed to me then—to an unreachable heaven, to the moon, leaving me behind in the depths.

I determined to work hard from the start of the year, to be at least among the most brilliant. And I did begin to shine. Weeks of effort went by, but then the cinematograph poster loomed at a distance like a demon—and in my

pocket were five piasters I had saved from my allowance. I could not resist the temptation. When school was over for the day, I went into the six o'clock show. It ended at nine. By the time I had made my way to my home at the far end of Ramleh, the clock was striking ten even as I was striking the door-knocker.

My mother opened not the door, but the glazed window set in it. She asked, "Where were you? At the cinematograph, no doubt!" I tried to deny it, but she demanded that I produce the five piasters which she knew had been in my possession. At this point, I could do nothing but confess the truth, whereupon she closed the window in my face saying, "Stay in the street until your father comes and deals with you!"

My father came, heard the story, ranted and raged and swore that I would stay out in the street—and woe betide anyone who opened the door to me.

Through the night I stayed in the middle of the road, not knowing what to do. The night watchman passed by me every now and again, striking the ground with his cudgel and clearing his throat aloud to warn malefactors that he was on his rounds, while I paced the deserted street in perplexity, in fear, in trembling, in despair. Again and again I passed by our door, looking longingly at it like one expelled from Paradise and awaiting mercy.

At last I sensed that the door was being opened very cautiously, with no streak of light showing from inside. Everyone had gone to sleep except my grandmother. She had remained on the lookout until she was certain that the household had retired, then come down to let me in whispering, "Come in without a noise, and I shall hide you in my room. Then in the morning the Lord will find a way out."

Morning came, and she went to my parents and kept soothing them and interceding for me, swearing on my behalf that my misdeed would be the first and the last, that I would never do anything of the kind ever again. In the end they consented to forgive me, on condition that I swear binding oaths never to be broken—and I knew what oath it was that was never to be broken: that I would not set foot in any cinematograph until after I had got my baccalaureate certificate at the end of secondary schooling. After that I would be free to do as I pleased with myself, and would be released from the oath. I took the oath and was true to it, for my foot never trod the floor of a cinema until it had trodden the threshold of the School of Law.

Ever since that cursed night I have walked in the path of seriousness. Even my reading took a new, a serious, direction. Among the books that have not strayed from my possession to this day is *al-Mahasin wa-l-addad* ('Virtues and Opposites') by al-Jahiz.[55] There is no doubt that it was at that time that I bought it, for written on it in my own hand is my name in full, and 'First Year Secondary, class I.'

But the credit for this new direction is also shared by a new teacher of Arabic who joined the school that year. He was a turban-wearer[56] but he was modern in his thinking. Unlike others, he refused to be tied to outdated curricula. He made Arabic literature likable and attractive to us by cutting down on poems of praise or wisdom or admonition that weighed heavy on our young hearts, and bringing in more of the poetry of delicate love by 'Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf, Mihyar the Damascene, 'Umar ibn Abi Rabi'a[57] and their like.

At these, the class, most of whom were adolescents or teenage youths burning with desire, would grow boister-

ous with admiration and appreciation; they would ask for encores, clamor for more of the same, inquire about sources, record in notebooks. We were at the age of flaming emotions, an age in which talk is mostly of love and passion, of beautiful sentiment, of creative imagination. What we wanted to hear recited was verse of this kind:

Send me your spirits in my sleep
If you permit my eyes to sleep;

or:

They stemmed the flow of their tears and said to me:
What have you not endured for passion, and what have we!

or:

To many a one with swelling breasts have I said, "Recline
Upon the sand" in a far-stretching desert—nor did she pillow her head.

We had no wish to hear, and cared nothing about such eulogistic lines as:

Loftiness alike in life and death—
Truly art thou a miracle!

or:

Within his dwelling's yard he holds a splendid negress
Fattening with juniper the joints of the slaughter-camel.

It was then that my true, conscious interest in Arabic literature began. Although this teacher made us love this literature, so that some took to incorporating verses in their compositions, seasoning their style with them, and others adopted rhymed prose, bejeweling it with classical idioms, he surprised me once by giving me top marks for a composition in which I had not troubled to squeeze in lines of poetry or to line up memorized idioms. It was

a piece I had written when I was tired out and almost ill, so I gave myself free rein and let my pen flow. I had expected a rebuke; instead I received praise, for he handed me back my exercise book after marking it, saying, "You have done well. The best kind of rhetoric is that which does not attempt to be rhetorical".[58]

I cannot understand how I have forgotten the name of this shaykh, although he deserved to have it carved on my memory forever.

Once again the final examination came round, and I passed and was promoted to the second year, but I was not among the top ones even though I had doubled the year. It was without doubt my weakness in arithmetic and in mathematics generally that put me back in the ranking.

It so happened that some uncles of mine came to us as house-guests that summer. The eldest had recently graduated from the Teachers' College and been appointed a teacher of arithmetic in Khalil Agha School. With him was his brother who was a first year student in the School of Engineering, and their elder sister who looked after their household in Cairo, in a modest flat in Salama Street in the Baghghala part of the Sayyida Zaynab quarter.

When they heard of my weakness in mathematics, my arithmetic teacher uncle suggested that I transfer to a school in Cairo, and lodge with them during the following academic year. Mathematics, they said, was particularly important and significant since it led to candidacy for the mid-Secondary *kafa'a*, the 'general competence' certificate. The arrangement would enable my uncle to strengthen me in that subject

The idea appealed to my parents, for they no longer had full confidence in my assiduity. Besides, my father was often away on his travels, going to deal with court

cases in several towns and returning to us in Alexandria every fifteen days. My mother also was preoccupied at the time with a house she had recently bought out of the money she had amassed after taking charge of her land.

I do remember the story of the buying of this house, for I followed it in silence without anyone bothering to include me in consultation. In fact my parents never had me take part in any discussion concerning their financial affairs even after I had become a prosecuting agent. My father used to say of his own father that he would make all kinds of dispositions regarding his lands, including sales and mortgages, but if anyone asked him, "Did you consult your son the judge," or "your son the chief of police," he would answer with surprise, "What? Consult children?" And my father followed the same practice.

My mother came to the view that she should have a permanent base in Alexandria, which is not far from Damanhur, so she should have no difficulty in shuttling back and forth to supervise her land. Once her mind was made up, my father approached brokers in search of a suitable house. The choice was narrowed down to two houses up for sale at the same price, and covering about the same area. One of them overlooked the sea, the other was inland. The latter had a luxuriant spacious garden in which were fruit trees, vegetables, and various kinds of palms. The former also had a large garden, but because of the proximity of salt water, it grew only grass and some flowers, and no fruit trees had been planted in it.

My parents' hesitation did not last long: they promptly opted for the one far from the sea. It was at a tram stop on the Ramleh line called Schutz. Behind it was a village known as the Ghubriyal estate, which was packed with shacks, dirt, and the noise of children let loose in its lanes, and these gave my parents trouble all through their life.

The ruddy oranges on the trees blinded them to the poor situation of the house, which later on became only worse.

It was the house by the sea that had a bright future, and had they chosen it they would have become rich. But who would have guessed then that the fine road along the sea-front, known as the Corniche, would be built in front of it, giving the lands and houses bordering on it the very great value they have today? In the past, the holidaymakers preferred locations far from the sea, because the shore was desolate and wild and rocky, and only a few people frequented it at some spots. To the brokers who offered it, my father said, "Are we mad that we should buy a house that looks on nothing but the blank sea?" One year before he died, he realized where the truth lay, and he said regretfully, bitterly, "I wish we had been mad!"

Furthermore, they did not have in hand the entire price of the house they bought, so they resorted to the usual practice: borrow the money and mortgage the house.

It was in this house that my uncles came as guests for the summer. We had a good time in the garden together, with much sport and laughter. And after the suggestion made by my unole was accepted and it was settled that I would leave with them at the end of the summer, my parents set about fitting me out. My father arranged to send my teacher uncle three pounds at the beginning of every month to cover my living expenses—for full board, that is. In addition, I was to receive in my own hand an allowance of fifty piasters. Out of this were to come all my needs and various outlays, including books additional to the prescribed texts, the weekly outing, the daily snack of sesame bread and cheese; at times too, when necessary, a new tie, shoe laces, the cost of a shoeshine, the price of a

collar or shirt or handkerchiefs or socks or a tassel for the fez, or the charge for having it pressed,[59] or even once in a while a meal of kebab at al-Hati or of trotters at the scalding house,[60] in addition to the many other foreseeable and unforeseeable items of expenditure.

8

When my parents cast me off to Cairo, they did not visualize to what spacious freedom and into what a broadly artistic atmosphere they were casting me. It is true that, in faithfulness to my oath, I never set foot in a cinema. But I turned to the theater as often as my time and pocket permitted!

George Abyad,[61] who had started as a member of Salama Higazi's troupe, had broken away from it and formed a distinctive troupe that put on tragedies without poems or songs—acting for the sake of acting, not acting for the sake of singing. This was something new, which no one but George Abyad had dared to do. He used to produce his 'stories' (the words for 'play' and for 'the stage' had not yet come into use) in the Opera House[62] or in some of the private theaters, such as the Printania, until

he had his own, bearing his name, built for him. It was in what used to be called Fu'ad Street, renamed 26th July Street, where now stands the Grand Hotel.

There is no doubt that George Abyad's influence on educated youth was strong. Soon a young lawyer called 'Abd al-Rahman Rushdi joined his troupe. For a lawyer to become a professional actor was something that caused comment and controversy. I saw him in the part of Nemours[63] in the play *Louis XI* and he dazzled me. He in turn hived off and formed a troupe of his own, which used to put on Italian and French dramas and melodramas, such as *Civil Death*, *Living Conscience*, *The Unknown Woman*, and others.

As for George Abyad, the mainstay of his work and of his art was tragedy of the highest quality—*Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, etc. George Abyad's theater came closest to serious culture—thanks to his earnest studies in France—whereas 'Abd al-Rahman Rushdi was an amateur whose acting ability was not acquired through study and cultural absorption abroad. But he used to affect the public by his burning emotions, actually weeping, shedding hot tears, while acting his part. He was to acting what al-Manfaluti[64] was to literature. The one with his voice, the other with his lachrymose style, used to move people to tears and were by many considered models of true art.

If it is permissible to describe such acting as romantic, then George Abyad's—by virtue of his reliance on sound artistic rendering, his firm rootedness in it, his sense of measure that avoided the overflow of emotion into seas of tears—may be called classical. Tragedy emerged in Egypt with the emergence of George Abyad, and it disappeared with his disappearance, all that remains today being drama and comedy. For nature had endowed

him with everything that was needed for the acting of tragedy: an imposing voice and a massive physique, in addition to talent and inborn propensity.

For all his success and the acknowledgment of his artistry, he used in his early days to draw the sarcasm of the satirical periodicals. He always rated a paragraph in a journal called *Sword and Nails*, in a column entitled 'Stings,' which consisted of jokes, quips, amusing puns, and touches of caricature (in words, not in drawings, for cartoons were not common then, so wordplays had to do duty in depicting well-known personalities in the society). It was round what was called 'the braying of Khawaga George'[65] that the jokes revolved.

I, however, like others among the many lovers of art, was a great admirer of George Abyad. I memorized whole pages of *Othello*, *Oedipus*, and *Louis XI*, and along with other amateurs among colleagues in our leisure time, I used to recite them in his manner. The only thing that limited my attendance at his productions in the Opera House was money. Whenever I could find five piasters in my pocket, I would make for 'the gods,' racing the wind to get there. And at midnight I would make my way back on foot, all the way from the Opera to Salama Street in the Baghghala quarter.

My late return attracted no attention in the household of my young uncles. No one there wielded real authority, giving him the right to oversee anyone else's behavior. No one struck terror into anyone else, no one issued orders or prohibitions to others. The one who, by virtue of age and the position he held, had charge of the household was the arithmetic teacher, and his gentle disposition, his kindly heart, his merry soul, his soft, easy-going personality made it impossible for him to dominate a mosquito![66] That was my good luck!

So I lived in perfect freedom. It has to be admitted that this freedom and my immersion into this kind of life might have been a danger to my schooling. I do not know exactly what it was that saved me. Was it divine protection? Was it some restraint within me? Was it some instinctive, inherited sense of balance that made its appearance in me with age? All I know is that the fascination did not overwhelm me to such a dangerous degree as to carry me away, as it had done others, out of the mainstream of schooling and education. Besides, I soon discovered that education itself could be an aid to my interest, for I discovered that *Hamlet* was one of the prescribed texts in secondary schools. I read it in English then, with a feeling of pride and exultation in that this play that was being performed on the stage had had official recognition from the schools.

Texts we were given to memorize, too, contributed to our indulgence in our pastime, for we turned their declamation into theatrical performances. This in turn developed in us a strong liking for Arabic poetry. We vied with one another in memorizing hundreds of lines, and competed in capping one another's quotations. Memory was then at the height of its fresh, youthful power, and could hold a great deal. I find it truly astonishing how in time all this evaporated. If I do remember a line, it is its general tenor that I recall but not its exact wording.

We graduated then to an unusual kind of acting. I picked two classmates who were outstanding in recitation and we met at leisure times to perform an improvised play. Perform before whom? Why, before the three of us! We three were author, cast, and audience at the same time. We started by agreeing among ourselves on a précis of a plot. We then assigned ourselves roles without a written or known text. We then began exchanging dia-

logue, declaiming, acting, giving tongue—in classical Arabic—to the stances taken by the protagonists. So we launched our theater, as the ancients had done, with improvisation.

Next we moved to authorship—the same three. We agreed to meet every Thursday afternoon in the house of one of us, which had a guest-room separate from the rest of the house. Of this we made a small theater. I volunteered to write the play, and I took good care to make the hero's part fit me, to crowd into it the key actions and put in his mouth resonant and magnificent lines. Schoolchildren in the area and neighbors got to know of this guest-room theater and what was produced in it, so they used to come and watch. We now had a written play, actors acting, and a public in attendance.

But the customary quarreling over the distribution of parts was also raging among us. It happened that I had written a play on al-Nu'man ibn al-Mundhir,[67] in which of course I reserved the title role for myself. But on the day of the performance, my classmate, who also owned the guest-room, turned up with his father's Arab-style cloak, put it on, and announced that he was going to act the part of al-Nu'man. The blood rushed to my head in fury. What—was this garment that I had tailored for myself to be worn by him? I shouted that he did not suit it, but he retorted that he was the most suitable person on earth for it. In the first place, he was wearing a cloak, and where was I to get such a thing? I had only an overcoat. Did it make sense that al-Nu'man should appear in a modern overcoat? A strong argument . . . . I asked him nevertheless why he should not lend me the cloak for the performance. He answered, "Why should I, when I am as fit as you are for the part? In fact I am nearer to it because my name is actually al-Nu'man. That was true: his name was

'Abbas Hilmi al-Nu'man—may God rest his soul, he died after a successful career as a doctor, long employed as a health inspector in the provinces. This argument about the name was irrefutable.

Or perhaps it was not irrefutable, but faced with his insistence when the house was his, the guest-room was his, the theater was his, and the cloak was his, I reluctantly had to yield to his will, although I did not forgive him this usurpation of a role I had carefully styled and embroidered for myself!

The two of us never agreed so readily as we did over the casting of *Louis XI*. He willingly yielded to me the title role, being well pleased with that of the Count de Nemours. I shall not forget the day years laterwhen by coincidence we found ourselves in the same provincial area, he as a health inspector and I as a prosecution agent. When he first spotted me, he greeted me with Louis XI's famous apostrophe to the Count de Nemours, taking me by surprise in the midst of our serious official concerns by declaiming in theatrical fashion, "Beware of playing with fire, Count!" I could not help laughing, and wondered at his cherishing such pleasant memory of those days.

The year we had spent in declamations, poetic contests, and play-acting came to an end, and we were offered the choice of the stream we might join after earning the certificate of general competence. Without hesitation, I opted for the literary stream, for I could not imagine myself as a doctor or an engineer. I abhor the sight of blood and do not like looking at sick people. As for engineering, I cannot understand it since I understand no part of mathematics. I tried to inveigle my friend 'Abbas Hilmi al-Nu'man into the literary stream, and he seemed favorable at first, but then he enrolled in the science stream, yielding to his father's desire to see him a

doctor. As for my father, he found my choice natural and consonant with his wish, that I follow his steps in the judiciary.

We passed and were awarded our certificates. From that moment, we turned our eyes toward the baccalaureate. We now showed the marks of seriousness, of responsibility, of preference for anything that made us conscious of our manhood. This manifested itself in the kind of reading we indulged in. It manifested itself also in our emotions.

For a strange, paradoxical mixture was at work in us. Along with our notions of elevated love, we began to know woman in the way it was possible for the likes of us to encounter her in those days—in those dark places in the quarter of Wagh al-Birka or in Clot Bey Street, whenever we could scrape together ten piasters on a Thursday evening.[68] Before that, we had only masturbation to fall back on. Once we had got to know those houses, then licensed, we could have direct sexual contact with a woman. There we used to sneak without fear of the calumniator or the censor.[69]

It happened once that a young widow came to us to work as a maid, and I noticed that she was seeking opportunities to be alone with me and tempt me. I nearly weakened and approached her, but I gave thought to the matter and its consequences, to the scandal that would ensue in the family, so I controlled myself and pulled myself together. My will vanquished the inclination of the moment.

And yet along with this and with the spicy sex books which passed surreptitiously from hand to hand in the class, such as *The Old Man's Return*,[70] we vied with one another in reading serious, tough texts. I remember that out of my allowance I bought a recently translated book

on ethics by the philosopher Spencer.[71] I felt proud to be reading philosophy, although I do not now believe that I understood anything worth mentioning in this or in other similar serious, dry books.

The trend was nevertheless distinctive of this stage. My fondness for reading novels and adventure stories had come to an end. Even my conversation with classmates had moved on from theater talk to discussions and debates on intellectual and philosophical topics.

For all that, this tendency to philosophize did not touch the area of beliefs or of metaphysics. It was confined to emotional problems. There was nothing then to shake our faith, or to make us believe that any kind of thinking could be raised that would evoke skepticism about religion. True, we did hear about a man called Shibli Shumayyil,[72] who spoke of Darwin and evolution and the origin of the species, who asserted that man was originally a monkey, and who denied the existence of God. But the society of that period was truly amazing in its liberalism and toleration, perhaps also in its confidence in the strength of its faith. It knew that Shibli Shumayyil was an unbeliever, that he openly displayed and took pride in his unbelief, but no one went beyond smiling or mocking or assailing him with witticisms.

One such is the *bon mot* attributed to Hafiz Ibrahim.[73] It is said that he was listening to a woman singer in some theater, and next to him was Shibli Shumayyil. When the singer performed particularly well, Hafiz Ibrahim gave vent to his enthusiasm by shouting, along with others, "Allah! Allah!" Then he turned to Shibli and said, "And what do you shout when you are thrilled by music or singing, since for you God does not exist? Do you shout, 'Nature! Nature?'"

This tolerance coupled with irony made it impossible for the believer to take unbelief seriously. This is why our thinking, although moving toward philosophizing, did not credit the idea that thought could be stretched as far as inquiring about the existence of God. In our days, not many books of philosophy had been translated into Arabic, nor had many been published that catered for our new tendencies or satisfied our growing arrogance. Nor did our knowledge of English enable us to read philosophy in that language. It may also be that we never heard of their titles or their authors, and even if we did we would not have had enough in our pockets to buy them.

As for the Arab philosophers, such as al-Ghazali or Ibn Rushd or Ibn Sina,[74] we never met anyone who guided us to them. It was not easy for the likes of us to obtain these 'yellow books,'[75] nor of course did the authorities think of including in the curricula a few selected pages as samples of Arab or Islamic thinking. Prescribed texts in schools were purely literary ones, and out of these what was chosen were examples of ornamented, abstract art.

Indeed Arabic literature is, in part and insofar as form is concerned, possibly the first abstract literature in history, for it rested on verbal esthetic values (as in the *maqamat*[76]), rhymed prose, rhetorical tricks, paronomasias, and so on.

Because of all these factors, we lost the opportunity of a genuine intellectual, philosophical formation precisely at that stage when the mind wants to open out to thought. Even the basic literary texts that we ought to have read at this stage were not within our reach.

We ought at that age to have been acquainted with the masterpieces of world literatures, or at least to have had some samples of them. The only translations that had appeared by then included the first volume of Victor

Hugo's *Les Misérables*, translated by Hafiz Ibrahim in a chaste style that we used actually to intone. Then came a poor translation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* that was not of a standard to suggest to us that this was lasting literature. It is true that Fathi Zaghlul[77] had translated a book by Montesquieu—perhaps it was *L'Esprit des Lois*—and my father had many copies of it which he had again been asked to distribute, but it did not attract me at the time, either because of the subject or because it was above the level of my perceptions.

Yet I did find among my father's books some valuable works of Arabic literature, of which I remember *al-'Iqd al-farid* by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-Kamil* by al-Mubarrad, *al-Amali* by al-Qali.[78] I read *al-'Iqd al-farid* with great eagerness several times at different stages of my life, and I still retain its several volumes in the old edition with its yellow pages and its thick leather binding. It is a wonder that my father, who ordered me to read the *mu'allaqat* and hit me because of them, never commanded me to read *al-'Iqd al-farid*, although it is simpler, more enjoyable, and more beneficial for someone of that age.

Perhaps he was not aware that it lay in his cases and chests. I was the one who discovered it while rummaging among those cases and chests, which for years had been food for cockroaches. My mother was extremely impatient with these books, and used to cast them out of her way, in any place where rubbish and jumble is thrown. For from the moment she married my father and discovered his poverty, she was terrified by the specter of need, and communicated her terror to my father, so that he forgot all about poetry and literature and thought. For the rest of his life he knew no concern and indulged in no talk that was not about the estate, the land, brokers, the house bought in Ramleh, the bank, the installments, the mort-

gage, the interest due. And my youth elapsed without my hearing anything from them that was not on these topics.

My father no longer had the time or the serenity of mind even to inquire about what I was reading. And I thank God for this, for if he had driven me to reading Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, al-Jahiz, Ibn al-Muqaffa'[79] and other such writers that I came to read by myself, if he had actually ordered me and beaten me for their sake as he had done with the *mu'allaqat*, I would have hated them and seen them only as frightening specters.

What I did keenly want to read at that age were the texts of those plays that we saw performed on the stage of the Opera and in other theaters. I looked for them hard and inquired whether they had been printed in book form. I was told that I might find what I wanted in some of the bookshops in Muhammad 'Ali Street or 'Abd al-'Aziz Street. But after a long search I discovered only a few badly printed editions. One was *Buridan or the Dreadful Tower;* another was *The Martyrs of Love*[80] with all its poems; also *Othello;* then *Louis XI,* with which I was delighted and out of which I memorized the title role in its entirety.

I did not, however, find *Hamlet,* which I was eager to read as it had been acted in Arabic. Nor did I find a single one of the Molière plays which 'Uthman Galal[81] had translated into colloquial verse.

I experienced actual pain at being deprived of these works, which I felt I greatly needed at this eager, enthusiastic period of my life. I learned later the true meaning of civilization. It consists of making accessible to people at all stages of their lifespan all the fruits of the intellect, the entire heritage of thought, in the language of the country.

9

Egypt was then living through the First World War. My sentiments were those of all my fellow countrymen. Our hearts were on the side of the Germans and the Turks. They had banded together against the English, whom we hated and whose occupation we wished to be rid of. Hatred of the English was something as natural as breathing. It was not something we debated.

The credit for rousing this feeling may well belong to that champion of freedom, Mustafa Kamil,[82] for in our hearts he was the symbol of resistance to the odious enemy known as 'the English.' To my young eyes Mustafa Kamil appeared, shortly before his death, as a legendary hero comparable to Abu Zayd al-Hilali or al-Zanati Khalifa. In fact he did later become a legend in the eyes of the common people. I used to hear him talked about here

and there and saw his photograph in some papers, and so built an imaginary picture of him.

The day he died, we were not in Cairo but in the provinces. But word of his death and of the nation's mourning reached my ear and my heart, and I also felt pain ripping my young heart.

There were persistent rumors that he had died poisoned, poisoned by his enemies the English. Naively I used to ask, "How did they do it?" I was told, "They put poison on the gold-adorned handle of his cane." I believed these stories. They penetrated my heart and mingled with my blood, carrying with them hatred of those who had done such a thing.

My father later told me that Mustafa Kamil had been a first-year student in the School of Law when he and his contemporaries were in the fourth. They saw in him merely a talkative young fellow, and did not condescend to give him their attention. They themselves were equally concerned with national politics, constant in pressing the Khedive for a constitution. They were in no way less patriotic or cultured than Mustafa Kamil. That may be, but what they failed to perceive was that this young man had something they did not have: the power to transmute words into practical revolutionary action, and a gift for rousing the common people. That is a special potential, not available to all.

As for our love of the Turks, it may have been for the most part also due to the influence of Mustafa Kamil, for his links with Istanbul and the Sublime Porte were common knowledge. People no longer felt the weight of Turkish rule as they felt that of the British occupation. The effect of Turkish rule had in fact faded from people's consciousness, and our link with it was no more than a semi-symbolic thread. As soon as war was declared, at a

time when the Khedive was spending the summer in Istanbul, even this thread was severed, and Egypt came under Britain's direct and absolute rule, both effectively and symbolically.

All through the war, we were looking toward the Suez Canal, awaiting the arrival of the Turks and the Germans to save us from the British occupation. There were reports day after day of armies having been spotted crossing the Canal. It was with this hope that we lived right through the war.

We in the cities did not experience the effects of the war to any great extent, except insofar as we had to put up with the insolence of the Australian soldiers and of the drunken English, or their grabbing what passers-by had in their pockets at night and what street vendors had in their hands by day. The only clearly visible sign of the war was that the windows looking onto the sea in Alexandria were painted black or blue by order of the English, so that lights should not reach German submarines at night. In Cairo, I do not remember that any stringent precautions were taken, because airplanes were not much used in that war, especially on our cities. I do not remember that sirens were sounded.

All through the war, there was only one instance of a German plane flying over Cairo. It dropped some shrapnel bombs. I remember the name of those bombs well because this unique event received much attention both in people's conversations and in the press. *Al-Lata'if al-musawwara*, the best known picture magazine of the day published pictures of the site of the incident, which was at the intersection of 'Imad al-Din Street and Maghrabi Street, later renamed 'Adli Pasha Street. There were, as I remember, no human victims. Only a carriage with its two horses were hit, the horses being killed.

On a certain day and at a certain hour, while I was in the street, I suddenly saw people crowding together and shouting, shopkeepers coming out in jubilation, and foreigners throwing their hats into the air, rejoicing, dancing, cheering, as if everybody had gone mad at the same time. I inquired what had happened, and heard next to me shouts of "Armistice! Armistice!"

The First World War ended, and soon afterward the 1919 uprising took place, and Egypt caught fire. It surprises me that I did not turn then to oratory or the drafting of pamphlets as did some of my classmates and acquaintances. I turned instead to the composition of rousing patriotic anthems, for which I sometimes also wrote the music. For this purpose I took as my model the tunes of the funeral music which the band of Hasab Allah al-Asli used to play before the coffins of the victims of demonstrations. I found out later that these were originally marches by Chopin and Wagner, but Hasab Allah—may God forgive him—had turned them back to front, producing something that would have reduced Chopin and Wagner to hearty laughter if they had heard it, and would have made them wonder at what had happened to their tunes.

The fact is that Hasab Allah's band as seen at funerals consisted of at least ten performers, but of these not more than three actually played; the other seven did not sound a note, their task being to carry blocked instruments or imitations made of painted wood to give the illusion that they were musicians, whereas they were merely theatrical extras going through the motions of music-making, in order to swell the numbers.

For my purpose, it was enough to get the basic tune which gave me the beat of the march, and out of this I developed a rousing new tune suited to the words of the

anthem I had written about some aspect of the uprising. Some of these anthems actually gained currency to an extent that surprised me. I heard one of them sung in a distant part of Cairo, without any of the participants in the demonstration knowing who was the author or the composer. That did not matter to anyone then; what mattered was picking up from anywhere any anthem that would set people's fighting spirit ablaze. I learned later that some were sung by the youth of Alexandria, yet if they were asked their provenance they would answer, "We don't know. It is just an anthem that has reached us from Cairo." I regret that I have not kept the text of a single one, nor do I remember a single tune. Yet my classmate 'Abbas Hilmi al-Nu'man, may God rest his soul, remembered them and used to sing them before me whenever life brought us together after we had entered our careers.

I fancy that I also composed some poems, similarly lost, on the national movement. In fact, I forgot them even at the time. I sometimes ask myself why I did not turn to poetry to express the emotions of youth as my father had done in his early days. I could have done it after a fashion. We were at the height of our practice of memorizing samples of poetry, and not a few of my classmates used to compose verse easily—I do not mean out of an inborn gift, but as an exercise. There was scarcely a young man then who did not compose odes on love of the motherland, and perhaps other loves as well. What was it that held me back?

I have only one explanation. It is that a young man resorts to poetry in response to the call of art in his depths, for souls in which the demon of art awakes try to find an outlet and a garb, and of all garbs poetry is the one most accessible to a young man. The model is there before him

in the poetry he has learned, and he has only to follow the same way. But not if there is another garb, such as music or drawing or acting, in which the demon has already decked himself. It is this latter condition that was mine. The demon of art in me had put on the garb of a play before he took notice of the garb of the poem, and once he had donned it he stayed within its cover and settled in.

Even when later on he considered assuming the garb of the novel or the short story or the like, he moved in that direction driven by conscious thought and urgent need, the need of a citizen to express his enthusiasm for his country and his vision of the future development of his society. At the time, literature needed to establish these new narrative genres on a serious basis so that they might carry new themes that could be borne only by them. These were at the dawn of their existence, and they needed impetus and reinforcement from all who dedicated themselves to art so that their molds might settle and command among other branches of Arabic literature the respect they had been denied. Indeed they had not yet been acknowledged as branches of Arabic literature. Like professional acting or music or painting or sculpture, they were areas to be approached only by the adventurous willing to gamble with their reputation.

It is not to be wondered at that the late Muhammad Husayn Haykal's novel, *Zaynab*,[83] should have remained buried in darkness, its author not daring to make his name known for several years, until he reissued it under his own name.

I was myself at the time in France writing *The Return of the Spirit*. For me to turn to the novel or the short story was—and has remained—a matter of voluntary national and artistic service. I undertake it whenever I feel that there is a need for a contributory effort, that duty calls for

an endeavor. I had a long period of hesitancy over the endeavor undertaken in producing *The Return of the Spirit* after I had written about a hundred pages. Should I go on with the writing, or should I tear up what I had written and devote myself to the other project that enticed me at the time?

This other project was the writing of a massive work on art in three volumes, the first being an exposition of art in general in all its aspects and all branches, the second a survey of Egyptian art in its various stages, and the third about art in the modern world. I was in Europe at the time, my head full of what I read and pondered—and dreamed as well. For to undertake such a work is a dream that would never occur to a person while fully awake—but such are the aspirations of youth.

The wonder is that I did write fifty pages or more of the first volume. But then I was assailed by uneasiness, and fell into perplexity. Which should I write, and which abandon? I knew myself: I cannot tread two roads. My capacity cannot cope with fragmentation, it can function only by concentration. I determined that I had to tear up one of the two works in order to free myself for the other. I had to put to death the pages written on one of them so that they should not haunt me and seduce me while engaged in the other. But which? I spent days weighing one argument against the other.

In the end, I tore up all that I had written of the first volume of the book on art. My reasoning was that someone was bound to come who would write such a book, for we were at the gates of a new University[84] that would have a faculty of arts with, no doubt, professors of art history. They would one day write on the subject with real competence, being specialists. But *The Return of the Spirit*, no matter what its worth, was a personal work about the

life of a particular individual that would not be repeated and of which I could not say, "Let us wait—someone else will come to write it."

Writing a book about art was a task that could be undertaken by universities—and not our universities alone but those in foreign countries. How often do studies appear there about our history, our civilization, our thinking, classical and modern! But writing an Egyptian novel or laying the foundation of an Egyptian narrative literature is something that can be undertaken only by its own man, by a native son. It must be grown in its own soil, at the hands of its own people. Furthermore, each generation is responsible for itself and for preparing the ground for the next. This particular genre in Arabic literature—the modern novel—had not yet taken shape as an artistic form. It would not have been right to leave it to the future, for its future would not come about except on the basis of the present. The novel that is written today is no more than a link in the chain of the natural growth of tomorrow's novel. Any delay in the forging of this link creates a gap, protracts a stage, and forms an obstacle to the momentum of growth.

So I tore up the fifty pages of my book on art—and I wish I had not, so that I might at least see now what it was I wrote.

I got on instead with writing *The Return of the Spirit* with undivided attention. So far as form was concerned, I had no greater ambition than to contribute, by an effort it was my duty to exert, to the development of the genre. As for the content, I wanted it to be not so much a record of a historical period as a document about feeling, the feeling of a young man in the middle of a fateful stage for his country.

This is because my view of art and its function is that it should leave the recording of history to the historians—that is their function, and they are more exact at it; it should also leave a detailed recounting of events to the newspapers—that is their function, they are more widely encompassing and more general, and their collected numbers fill the public libraries. There remains one thing that only art can do, and that is to reanimate impressions and give prominence to feelings.

My artistic equipment seemed to me incapable of bringing out all that was in me, for what I had in me at the time was wider and deeper than a single novel could make room for. *The Return of the Spirit* was only one episode of a more substantial work which I pictured and planned in my head, but for the completion of which I never found the appropriate circumstances. This is why I left the manuscript of *The Return of the Spirit* lying in a drawer for a long time. Entirely by chance, while I was a prosecution agent in Tanta, it fell into the hands of my colleague in the judiciary Muhammad Tahir Rashid—retired President of the Court of Appeal—who is a cultured and well-informed person, fond of literature and of reading. He took it to Cairo and insisted on having it published in spite of my hesitation. Before I knew what was happening, it was in the press.

In any case, the personal motivation that made me write *The Return of the Spirit* in the way it was written could not have been re-lived, for political conditions had changed. The way the political parties were formed after the 1919 Revolution, their elbowing to have a stake in men of wealth and prestige and big landowners, to possess them and enrol them in their membership, put the leadership of the parties in the hands of that class,

allowing thinkers and truly cultured people only secondary positions with no power of direction.

This accounts for the weakness of the intellectual and social role of these parties. Their efforts were confined to the political aspect. And even this often gave birth to mere wrangling over ministerial seats and a scramble for the fruits of the tree of power.[85]

That was what interested most of those leaderships. As for the cultured, thinking writer, he was mostly, in their eyes, a mere hack hired to defend their point of view and to attack their opponents. This is what alienated me from these parties and kept me out of them. It made me stand against them all. It made me see everything around me moving within a false, counterfeit political framework. It made the picture one could paint of our country then as different as could be from what my ardent sentiments had envisioned, those sentiments which had driven me to write such a book as *The Return of the Spirit*.

10

My first full-length play was the one entitled *al-Dayf al-thaqil* ('The Unwelcome Guest'). I think it was written toward the end of 1919—I cannot remember exactly. All I do remember—for it has long been lost—is that it was inspired by the British occupation. The reference was to this unwelcome guest's stay among us, with no invitation on our part, and no wish to depart on his.

It was of course impossible to put such a play on the stage at that time: the censor could not have failed to see the point of such a theme at a time when people spoke or whispered of nothing but this unwelcome occupation and when its misery might be lifted from us.

But the question to be asked here is: Why did I start my writing career with a play? Perhaps it is the essence of drama—i.e. the creation of a character through dialogue,

not description, through his own words not those of another—that suits my temperament. Why? Is it a matter of heredity? Is the spirit of disputation, of logic, of concentration, of putting the right word in the right place, the inner debate, the judicial concern and balance found in my father—is all that closest to the essence of drama? I do not know.

There may also be another, deeper reason. It may be the very character of our literary heritage. The characteristic structuring and concentration displayed by Arabs from earliest times in their poetry, their thought, their prose literature, their rhetoric—this characteristic which is the essence of dramatic art—has always led me to believe that the inborn disposition of the Arab is a theatrical one. Although a variety of circumstances has prevented its realization in the way known to the Greeks, it did not bar the manifestation of its elements in other forms. Whenever I picture to myself the scenes described in al-Ma'arri's *Risalat al-ghufran*,[86] or read passages in the form of dialogue in *al-Aghani*[87] or in al-Jahiz and observe the close structuring of image and expression, the direct aiming at the crux, the quick coloration of a personality or an emotion or a witticism without padding or redundance, I am convinced of—and sense—the depth of the hidden roots of this leaning of mine toward dramatic art. At any rate, this inclination has remained and moved with me through every step I have taken in my life and in my studies.

I earned my baccalaureate and enrolled in the School of Law, which was at that time a dependency of the Ministry of Justice. It admitted then only a limited number—eighty of the top successful candidates in the baccalaureate, as I remember, in the year I joined. My rank, again as I remember, was the seventieth.

I was, needless to say, not among the outstanding students in the School of Law.[88] In fact, I failed the examination which was to decide whether I was promoted from first year to second. It is peculiar that I always passed the national examinations—the primary, the general competence, the baccalaureate —at the first attempt, but I failed in the first year of each stage. I always stumble with my first step. I failed in several subjects, including French, which was necessary in the study of law because the major reference works were in French.

Arabic was used in teaching only on a very limited scale. Teaching was in English in political economy, Roman law, introductory law, and forensic medicine, and it was done by English professors some of whom were not competent. Some, like the professor of Roman Law, Mr. Melville, came in obviously drunk, and we did not understand much of what he said. We sometimes took advantage of his drunkenness, by appealing to him to save us from the difficult pages of the prescribed book. He used to comply while half asleep, saying, "All right! Omit from page so-and-so to page such-and-such." A week later, when he had forgotten what had happened, we would appeal to him again, and he would drop some more pages. This went on until he had done away with half the book, and we were examined only on the remaining half.

But the earnest student among us had to rely on his own efforts and consult French reference works. Yet the French we had learned in the literature stream of secondary school was not sufficient for the purpose, so we were taught that language in the School of Law by a French professor who was knowledgeable about law; his name was Monsieur Tondeur, and he used to acquaint us

with legal technical terms to enable us to consult the essential reference books.

The truly outstanding foreign teacher in the school was the principal, Mr. Walton—I think he was Irish. The book he had written about law, in English, was the most helpful and useful.

Nevertheless I failed at the end of my first year, and of course this had a bad effect on my parents. When I went to spend the summer vacation with them in Alexandria, they received me with frowning, angry faces. They warned me that I was not to spend the vacation in enjoyment I had not earned, but in studying, and especially in improving my French since I had failed in it quite disastrously.

My father agreed to pay for me to have private tuition in the Berlitz school, which specialized in living languages. I did attend that school throughout the summer, and was instructed three times a week by a French lady teacher who was of great help to me. She made me understand that a language cannot be truly learned except by reading, especially by someone at my rather late age, for with my broad perceptions I could teach myself the language by constant reading better than by exposing myself to the traditional lessons designed for schoolboys.

She advised me to buy a book that belonged to the solid core of French literature, yet so simple in style that I would not find it impossible to understand. That was Alphonse Daudet's *Lettres de mon Moulin*. I got hold of the book and launched into it under her guidance and with the help of the *Petit Larousse* dictionary, and I did find its style both easy and unattainable—easy for a beginner like myself to read, unattainable for the man of letters who tried to emulate it. My ability to progress with that book was very encouraging. I felt that the locked doors of French were opening out to me in welcome.

When we were through with that, the teacher led me on to another book of the same character in that its style was so simple it would not be beyond the reach of a child, yet its thinking so deep that it would have me stop in perplexity or contemplation. To her that was not important. What was important was that I should understand the language and learn how its simple expressions were constructed. The writer was Anatole France. I learned later that he used to strive and struggle to bring his style to that point of pure, luminous simplicity, like drops of water falling from the sky. Again later, I understood why it is said that the key to Anatole France is Racine.

I went on along the same road—on my own when I was done with that school at the end of summer. I kept buying French books and reading them. With the help of the dictionary that was at my side and the eagerness within me, I was able to progress in the language so well that I could read whatever I wanted. It became my practice to peer into the windows of European bookshops, and to thumb books and journals. I came across a secondhand collection of the plays of Alfred de Musset at a price I could afford. Then another collection of Marivaux[89] which I bought as well. And I found a set of some ten volumes offered in an antique shop at an insignificant price; it was entitled *Forty Years in the Theater* and was by the famous critic Francisque Sarcey.[90] It helped me to get acquainted with the life of the French theater, with the classical, romantic, and modern plays that were presented in it, and with developments in this literature of which I had known nothing. Finally I landed on heaps of numbers of a journal that printed the full texts of the most important plays produced on the stages of France and more generally of Europe, together with critics' opinions. That was the supplement to the *Illustration*, which bookshops sold not

by the number but by the stack, and cheaply too. I helped myself to these by the armful.

Although from then on I worked steadily at the law until I got the degree, these reading materials that utterly possessed me distracted me from concentrating in my studies to the point that might have earned me honor and distinction.

Among the theatrical troupes that were active then apart from George Abyad's was the one in which 'Abd al-Rahman Rushdi was partnered by 'Umar Wasfi. Among their most successful plays was *Round and Round*, by a French author whose name may have been Antony Mars. They followed the French text until the troupe of Nagib al-Rihani took it over, Egyptianized it, and performed it under the title of *Thirty Days in Jail*.[91] Of 'Umar Wasfi's roles, the one I shall not forget was that of the old legal guardian in *The Barber of Seville*. There was also the troupe of Munira al-Mahdiyya, which specialized in the operetta; the author Muhammad Yusuf al-Qadi wrote exclusively for it. Another troupe that produced musicals was that of Shaykh Ahmad al-Shami.[92] Finally there was the 'Ukasha troupe, which had inherited some of the plays of Shaykh Salama Higazi. The Azbakiyya Garden Theater had not been completed then, so there were annual performances in the Opera House.

Those were the companies concerned with serious theater. Of those that went for comedy, there was the company of 'Aziz 'Id,[93] which specialized in frank vaudeville, in translations closely following the text of Georges Feydeau.[94] After a while appeared the troupe of Amin 'Ata Allah, then that of al-Rihani, associated with the character of Kishkish Bey, which he took over from Amin 'Ata Allah. And there was the troupe of 'Ali al-Kassar, Egypt's unique Berberine.[95]

One night I was at the Opera House watching a play by the 'Ukasha troupe, and found there a classmate of mine in the School of Law. I knew he was not interested in plays or novels, so I asked him what had brought him there. He told me that his brother was the author of the play we were watching. I was surprised and delighted, and asked him to introduce me to his brother. So I came to know one who then became my friend and co-author of a musical play, *The Seal of Solomon*. He was Mustafa Effendi Mumtaz, an employee in the administration responsible for tribal chiefs and village headmen in the Ministry of the Interior.

Mustafa Mumtaz had entered Government service with a baccalaureate, and had not gone on to higher education as his brother, my classmate in law, had done. Yet I found him better grounded in both Arabic and English, more widely read, a better conversationalist. He also had a great deal of talent, of feeling for art, and of true love for the theater. In him I found a congenial friend, whereas I did not trouble much with his brother who, although a classmate, was almost a stranger to me in mentality and tastes.

I used to visit Mustafa at home from time to time. He was married and had children. We spent a great deal of time in the sittting room chatting about art and plays. He would listen to me hold forth on the French plays I read, and I to him on the English plays which he used to get by mail from London, published in a cheap series. We would then review what we found here or there that seemed to us suitable for translation, or that tempted us to Egyptianize.

Before I got to know Mustafa Mumtaz, I had myself Egyptianized a play which I entitled *The Groom*—based, perhaps, on a play called *Arthur's Surprise*—and I had

offered it to the 'Ukasha troupe. At that time Tal'at Harb—who was considered the Sa'd Zaghlul of the national economy, the founder of the first Egyptian bank[96]—was thinking of the creation of an Egyptian, Eastern theater.

To this end, he had the Azbakiyya Garden Theater built in Arab style, and he made it a condition that only Egyptian plays in Arabic be presented there—not translations following the literal European text and produced in Western dress, as was done by the companies of George Abyad, 'Aziz 'Id, or Yusuf Wahbi, who was looming on the horizon with a new company in the Ramsis Theater.[97] If the use of a foreign theme was unavoidable, it was to be Egyptianized or Arabized—'adapted' was the term in use then. This meant that if the subject of the foreign play was appropriate to present-day life, it was Egyptianized, whereas what had to be set in bygone days was to be cast into the early Arab or Mamluk eras. It is in this that the Azbakiyya Theater specialized, never departing from it. Classical Arabic was used if the theme was historical or serious, colloquial Arabic if it was contemporary or humorous.

Whatever may be thought of Tal'at Harb's choice of the 'Ukasha company to occupy the new Azbakiyya Theater and to fulfil this mission, thanks to financial backing by Banque Misr and the encouragement of Tal'at Harb it succeeded in producing operettas and operas and all other performances that required lavish expenditure.

Mustafa Mumtaz and I eventually chose an interesting theme that I had picked up in a French novel, the title of which may have been *The Maid of Narbonne* or something of the kind—I do not now remember. Out of that we were able to fashion a musical play for the 'Ukasha company. We had the action take place in an Eastern city

at some ancient time. We went over a number of cities, but could not find one that suited the atmosphere of the play, for we wanted an Eastern city, but not a major one that would leave no scope for the audience's imagination. In the end, we got hold of a map and kept scanning it until we came across a small city in Persia called Merv, and we shouted together, "This is our city!" We called the play, *The Seal of Solomon.*

We apportioned the writing of the lyrics between us, and then took the play to the 'Ukasha company. It was received by its director, its star singer, the one who always played the hero whether we liked it or not, its pampered actor, he whose command or prohibition was law within the company, the youngest of the 'Ukashas and—by the admission and consensus of the whole of Cairo—the most insufferable of them all: Zaki Bey 'Ukasha, the same who owned a huge, shining diamond ring and made a point of displaying it always on his finger, in order to dazzle the ladies secluded in boxes draped with screens like mosquito nets. He insisted on wearing this ring even when he took the part of a beggar in *The Two Orphan Girls,* brandishing it so that it shone on his finger even as he intoned, nay chanted, nay sang, 'Alms for the love of Allah, O my Masters!'

He was a past master not at these arts alone, but also at the art of procrastination with authors of no account like ourselves and poor composers like Kamil al-Khula'i.[98] We would go to him week after week, and he would say, "I have not read your play yet," "I was busy," "I was hoarse," or "My mood was all wrong!" And yet the truth was that he had read the play on the first evening, had determined what his part in it was to be, and had passed it on to the composer.

If by some chance we learned that the play was in the composer's hand, which meant it was at the final stage before production, we would waste no time in facing him with what we knew and demanding either our fee or the return of the script. His ploy then was, "Come back tomorrow." We would call on him the next day and he would say, "Be patient another couple of days." After the couple of days, it was "There is to be an inventory. You'll have to wait a little." And in the last resort, "Go to Hashim Effendi, the chief accountant of the company." We would go to find him only to be told, "He is on a journey," whereas in fact he was hiding in another room. We would keep dogging Hashim Effendi and he would slip away like mercury.

When at last we cornered him where no escape was possible and all the tricks of evasion based on appearance and disappearance were exhausted, the gallant and invincible Zaki 'Ukasha would move to another stage, another battlefield: haggling about the price. He would not give an author more than thirty pounds for a play—fifty on rare occasions. But in the books he would enter two hundred pounds as the payment to the author or the composer, the difference of course landing in his generous pocket. Toward the end of his life, it was known that he had amassed a huge fortune, yet extracting even the thirty pounds was no easy matter—there would have to be, on the way, endless discussions and negotiations. I could see not a flicker of hope on the horizon of an early success in our negotiations—even Sa'd Zaghlul's negotiations did not compare!—leading to an actual disbursement of cash by Zaki 'Ukasha, so I gave way to despair, left that matter in the hands of my friend and partner Mustafa, and turned my attention instead to following

up the music that Kamil al-Khula'i had been commissioned to compose.

This composer was the wonder of his age by dint of his Bohemian character and his vast knowledge of Eastern music. When I got to know him after he had received our play to set its lyrics to music, he was about fifty years of age. He had composed the music for many of Munira al-Mahdiyya's musical plays, and had acquired particular fame for the tunes he composed for her *Carmen*, and then her *Carmenina*. His contemporary in age, also engaged in the same activities, Dawud Husni,[99] was no less excellent in this kind of artistry.

The musical play was at the time in full bloom. The mark that Shaykh Salama Higazi had left on the formation of a public for it could not easily be effaced after him, and in fact the genre progressed from a stage in which some poems were set to music to that of the operetta and the genuine opera. Sayyid Darwish[100] had risen to prominence some years earlier thanks to his musical contribution to some of the plays of Kishkish Bey, that is to say, of al-Rihani.

And yet what he was doing in that line was not esteemed as art, because al-Rihani himself was not getting the respect he earned in his later years. The popularity of Kishkish Bey was on a par with the popularity of cabarets.[101] The real secret of his success was the beautiful blond foreign female dancers that came to us in the aftermath of the war, such as Dina Liska and her like, whom hunger in the defeated countries such as Austria and Germany drove out to take refuge in Egypt, which was then open to all and sundry. Sons of rich parents used to throng these places in order to associate with the girls at the end of the evening. They used to sit through the

same al-Rihani play night after night, not out of love for the play, but for the leg show.

Despite the value of what Sayyid Darwish did for these musical shows and his gift, eventually recognized, for representing the various arts and crafts in original and expressive tunes, he received no appreciation or respect until he had composed music for serious plays like the 'Ukasha company's *Huda*, or for *al-'Ashra al-tayyiba* ('The Ten of Diamonds'), or *al-Barruka*, or *Shahwazad*, i.e. Shahrazad[102] (this being how the word was written and displayed in posters, with—wonder of wonders—no one objecting or noticing anything). Even when he founded, in partnership with 'Umar Wasfi, a musical company which performed on the stage of *Dar al-tamthil al-'Arabi* near the street of Wagh al-Birka and it went into quick bankruptcy, this material failure was not in any way linked with a moral failure; on the contrary, he lost money but gained artistic kudos from cultured people who knew the value of art.

11

The academic year ended, the examination was held, and—by an act of Providence and despite my artistic involvements—I was admitted to the fourth and last year, the one leading to the *licence*. I left *The Seal of Solomon* in the hands of my colleague Mustafa, and headed for Alexandria to spend the summer there.

On arrival and at my first look at our blessed home, I was almost thunderstruck. What was that I saw before me? It was no longer a house, but a strange structure of which I could not tell the front from the back. One wall had been pulled down here, another built up there, a staircase had been ripped out, the entrails of a room were on view, the roof had been decapitated, and there were other mutilations of the same kind.

I soon learned the reason. It had occurred to my parents to carry out some improvements to the house, and to add a story to it. Cotton had sold at a high price that year, so they had made a fair amount of money. They chose to use it not in paying off the mortgage on either the land or the house, but on alterations to the house. I do not know which of them, my father or my mother, gave birth to this luminous idea, but I do know that the first hole made by pick-axes in the walls of this house was destined not to be refilled by all the money on earth—not by my father's salary, which by then was considerable, and not by the loans which they got from banks and from usurers.

Building and demolition in our house became something natural and continuous, like eating and drinking. For months, for years, it never stopped. For my father had decided to be his own architect, contractor, and master of works. He hired masons, carpenters, and blacksmiths, and would tell them, "Cut a new passage here. Pull down that wall over there. Block this window here. Fit a door over there." No sooner had they done what he commanded than it was found that the door opened not on the hall but on the water closet, that the wall that had been removed merged the kitchen with the lounge, and so on and so on. My father would then command them to block what they had opened and rebuild what they had demolished. Next he would turn to another wall and order it torn down, only to find that it supported the ceiling of another room which was now sagging, so there was more rebuilding. All along, he was absolutely determined to rely on himself and his own expertise, and not to bring in an architect.

I was not only an observer of what was going on but also a victim, incommoded by having to sleep for a long time in rooms of which the windows had been ripped out and replaced by blankets. I would ask my father, "Why

don't you employ an architect to take charge of all this, and give yourself a rest?" He would answer mockingly, "You are a fool! Does anybody but a fool employ an architect? What will he do but draw on blue paper a few elegant lines with a ruler and a compass and say, 'Here is a room, there is a hall?' What he will say we already know. We are far the best judges of what we want."

The ultimate result was quite simply that masons, carpenters, and painters became permanent residents with us. They arrogated to themselves a room near the garden gate, where they settled, stayed overnight, held parties, and received immediate members of the family, kinsmen, and friends as guests. From the house, a regular supply of coffee and tea and lunches and dinners was sent down. They even acquired a voice in what was cooked and presented them day by day. They would say, "We are tired of *mulukhiyya* and okra. Make us some *kushari* to-day!"[103] Sometimes they would suggest, "Pickle us some cucumbers and green peppers," and they would even prescribe the way they liked the pickling to be done and the ingredients to be mixed. And in a corner of the garden they planted radishes and leeks and watercress. They thoroughly enjoyed this comfortable, soft life.

What with rooms minus walls, windows minus glass, and hammering and demolition taking place above our heads in the new story, my younger brother and I found life unbearable. Yet when I asked the workmen when the work was to be finished, they replied, "Never—it is like Goha's waterwheel![104] What we build in the morning we demolish in the afternoon. It's the Bey's orders."

And in truth it seems to me that my father had belatedly found his greatest hobby and entertainment in this building venture, and that he had come genuinely to believe that he knew all there was to know about archi-

tecture and building. He did occasionally consult his old friend Yusuf[105] if he happened to meet him in Cairo, but such encounters were rare, for my father had taken up residence and settled in Alexandria as President of its court. When he came back from a session tired and exhausted, his first action was not to go in for a meal, but to head straight to the masons and carpenters to inspect what they had done, and check whether they had followed the instructions he had explained at length in the morning before he went out to work.

This had become his routine. He would summon the masons and carpenters and painters before him every morning to explain to them what they were to do during the day. This he called 'the lesson' which he had to get into their heads. He would also expound to them what he called the daily 'duty roster.' Before leaving, he would make a point of asking them, "Have you learned the lesson?" They would answer with one voice, "We have learned it." He would stress, "And is the duty roster understood?" They would confirm, "Understood." Furthermore, it was his custom whenever he issued an order or instruction to anybody to require him to repeat what was requested word for word to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

And yet when he returned shortly before the afternoon prayer, what we heard from him was uproar and shouting and reprimand. He would say, "These masons and painters are asses. They have not understood a word of what was explained to them!" And he would fall upon what they had built, tearing it with his own hands and kicking at it, shouting, "Tear it down at once! Everything is to be pulled down. The work is all wrong, from beginning to end!"

He would measure the walls with the walking stick he always carried instead of with a meter stick. If one of the tradesmen objected and told him, "Measure with the meter stick, your Excellency. It is right here!" he would shout at him, "My stick is more accurate than your meter. I have measured it against the original architectural meter in the Survey Department. It is exactly ninety centimeters."

His interest in architecture reached such a pitch that sometimes when we were walking together in the street he would suddenly stop in front of a house and tell me, "Wait while I measure this façade," and he would do so with his stick. If I asked him, "Why? Are we about to buy it?" he would answer, "Not at all. Just a matter of knowing." At other times we might again be walking in a street discussing important matters when he would interrupt the conversation and turn to me asking, "How wide would you say this street is?" And without waiting for an answer, he would brandish his stick and measure it, while I inwardly thanked God that there were no passers-by! I asked him what the point of this was, and he said, "Silly boy! The point is that we have to be knowledgeable about all these things, so the Municipality should not one day claim that our street is one of those on which it has decreed such-and-such in local taxes."

He also carried an old, cheap, metal pocket watch which he set back ten minutes,[106] and if asked why he would say, "So that I always have ten minutes to spare for emergencies."

For all these peculiarities, my father possessed a quality that I regret I did not inherit, for it would have helped me a great deal, especially in the narrative arts. This was his inclination to dig deep into the minute details of anything in life, whether of immediate relevance to him or not. The

amount of knowledge he accumulated on all things was truly amazing. He knew exactly how many bricks were needed to build a room so many meters by so many, how many measures of seeds were needed to plant so many acres with clover or cotton or maize, how many times a particular crop needed to be irrigated. If you were to question him on the law and its complicated procedures, or on the distinctive qualities of people engaged in different occupations, on medicine and pharmacology, on language and its grammar, on poetry and its meters, on blacksmithing or carpentry, or even on perfumery, you would find that he was master of fine and strange details.

I on the contrary can take things in only in their broad outlines, their main significations and not their details. I am also inclined to rid myself of anything I can dispense with. I have never carried a watch. I have never tried to acquire any curio or objet d'art. I eat only what is strictly necessary. This is why drama suits me as a medium of expression, for—unlike the novel which concerns itself with details—its proper scope is concepts and essences.

Yet for all his abundant knowledge of the finest details in any matter, my father no sooner turned to thinking about an actual project and carrying it out than he fell into laughable failure. With him knowledge was one thing, execution was another. Or could it be a clash between the imaginative and the practical tendencies in the same individual? My parents were of a practical turn of mind, but they were also imaginative. They would think about a practical project in a practical way, but then imagination intervened and swept them off to a ridiculous situation.

The building work in the house eventually came close to an end. The resident masons and carpenters and plasterers were getting ready to leave and end the era of

occupation when a new idea struck my parents. They noticed that some of the higher neighboring houses overlooked the garden at the back, so they said, "Let us block their view. Let us build a wall." Then the notion of the wall developed into something else, a new idea. They reasoned, "Since we are going to build a wall, which costs money, why not build a second wall parallel to it, and we would then merely have to roof the space between them to have an independent addition to the property, suitable for living in or for renting?"

They set about carrying out the project. The masons, the carpenters, and the plasterers returned to their room. In time, the new wing was completed. Having brought it to a happy conclusion, they peered at it and pondered, "It would be nice if we could connect it to the original building by an elevated passageway or a bridge." Such a construction was unique, and odd-looking in a dwelling. But it was completed. They looked again and said, "Why leave the bottom of the new wing bare and exposed to the dust of the garden? Should we not have a terrace separating the wall from sand and dust?" This also was done. It stretched all the way along the wall of the wing, a matter of thirty meters at least, and it was paved with floor tiles that cost a fortune. Its surface and its dimensions made it look, as one of our visitors said, as if it had been designed for roller-skating.

One would surmise that things would come to an end at this point, and that the masons and carpenters and plasterers would up and bundle their belongings in preparation for departure. So they did in fact. But then the gardener appeared asking for manure for the garden—sacks upon sacks of horse manure needed for the fruit trees and the lawn. He also spoke of the necessity of

bringing in this manure at regular intervals to ensure the blossoming of the garden.

My parents thought about this with their customary genius and came up with a luminous idea: they should buy a horse, and use its droppings as manure. That would save them the cost of the manure to be bought, to say nothing of the cost of transport saved by the carriage that the horse would draw. That made sense. But where was the horse to live? Of course a stable would have to be built for it. That was natural. And at the far end of the garden was a suitable space. But would the stable be built in the fashion of all the stables in God's creation? Oh, no! An original design had to be produced by the genial architect, namely my father. And he did order the erection of an extraordinary stable on three levels. The top level was for the coachman to occupy, for he had to have living quarters; the middle level would accommodate the horse, and the bottom level its droppings, which were to slide down a hole and accumulate.

My father was very proud of this wonderful idea, and urged the masons and painters and carpenters to execute it right away. So they laid bricks and built up and whitewashed, and the stories rose one upon the other. And the building remained towering and empty for years, never graced by coachman or horse or manure.

That was because thinking had quickly shifted to something else: the exploitation of this large house, which thanks to successive brainwaves had outstripped the needs of the family. Why should it not be let to holidaymakers during the summer? Why, that was wisdom itself. The income from that would at least pay the mortgage installments. But then they pondered some more: if we are to let to holidaymakers, why not a third story?

This time the idea was my mother's, and as soon as my father went away to Cairo on business, she set about realizing it. And since the art of architecture was as easy to master as it had proved to be, why should she not rival my father in it? So she issued her orders to the team of masons and painters and carpenters. As soon as my father was back and saw the new storey beginning to rise, he also rolled back his sleeves and returned to action, giving his 'lesson,' subjecting all to his 'duty roster,' and pulling down at night what was built during the day.

My father's reputation as a builder had spread in the city thanks to his purchases of bricks, floor tiles, Swedish timber, laths, steel girders, lime, and oils. Some of his colleagues in the judiciary who wanted to have a house built in the city or some quarters in the countryside came to him to receive instruction. I remember one consultant magistrate who shortly afterward became a minister, who used to come every afternoon to sit on a chair in the garden drinking the coffee that was brought to him, watching wide-eyed as my father went up and down the scaffolding, measuring walls with his stick, issuing orders and prohibitions, advising, counseling, scolding, shouting . . . . This consultant magistrate intended to have a small house built on an estate of his, and did not know how to go about it. When he saw my father dashing hither and thither in that great sprawling building, he muttered his admiration and esteem, then turned to me and said in a tone that bespoke sincerity, "Your father is an incomparable master of the art of architecture!"

At last all the building operations were over—God only knows after how long—and no ideas were left in the quiver for adding or subtracting anything. At that point my parents turned against the house and took to cursing it, especially as the idea of letting it had failed, for

holidaymakers were beginning to favor the sea and the house's poor location was putting off prospective tenants. The cost of protracted building operations had weighed on my parents, debts were proving burdensome, and the price of cotton was dropping. Their thoughts were now directed to one aim: getting rid of the house. But how?

My father envisaged two possibilities: either selling it or exchanging it for land. He had recourse to brokers. And the dealings with brokers became no less involved than those with masons and carpenters.

He had become a consultant magistrate[107] then left the service because he had reached the age of retirement. To be more accurate, he had accepted a golden handshake from the Ministry of Justice which had discovered that he and a number of other senior magistrates had been clever at tinting or dyeing their hair and mustaches and had sat on undisturbed, so it reminded them that, by any reckoning they chose, they had long before slipped past the age of retirement unawares. Agreement was reached to everybody's satisfaction, and along with those colleagues my father left the service. For the remainder of his life he could give his undivided attention to his private affairs, and he had no concern other than the sale or exchange of the house.

One day he came out with a new idea: loading the house with heavier mortgages. His reasoning was strange. It was that the more heavily indebted a piece of property was, the easier it would be to dispose of it or exchange it. That reasoning we could not follow. We kept telling him, "How can that be? Does it make sense? It is the opposite that is true." He answered as if pitying us for our ignorance, "What makes sense is what I have been saying. For who is it who offers his land in exchange for a house? Obviously one whose land is mortgaged. Naturally, he

does not expect to have it exchanged except for a house that is equally mortgaged. For where is the idiot who would sacrifice a deed unburdened by any mortgage in return for mortgaged property? Since it's a matter of mortgage for mortgage, why should we give up a house and surrender it clean with its minimal mortgage to someone who will present us with land heavy with calamities?" Some logic!

From then on, my father was seen only in the company of brokers. He would be either walking in the street along with a broker or sitting in a café talking to a broker. Somebody once related to me that he had seen my father sitting at a café table on the pavement, waiting for a broker. Whenever the waiter came and made a show of wiping the table to get an order, my father would say, "Wait a little longer, my good man." The waiter would hold back a little, then come forward and wipe the table again. My father got annoyed, so he left the table and stood waiting at the edge of the pavement. When the waiter came once more to wipe the table he found it empty. He looked round and saw my father standing at the end of the street, looking daggers at him and saying, "Do you want something from me even here?"

I myself once saw him in the street as I was about to enter the Trianon café in Alexandria, when I was already a functionary. He stopped me and said, "You are a fool to go in there. They charge three piasters for a cup of coffee." He left me and went to another café near the Stock Exchange called the Albyn, where the cup of coffee cost a piaster and a half. Yet I heard that he used to spend nearly twenty piasters a day there on the many cups of coffee consumed by brokers who got to hear about what he was after, and used to come one after the other raising his hopes and fostering his dreams.

12

My father's wish to dispose of the house outlived him. We did in fact exchange it for fallow land not reached by water; but God willed that that should not happen in his lifetime. He gave him the grace of dying in that house of his, or more correctly that his funeral should go out of that house, although in that respect I nearly committed an unforgivable error of judgment.

I was in Cairo in charge of the Directorate of Investigations in the Ministry of Education when I got news that he was ill and had been taken to the French Hospital in Alexandria. I went there immediately and found him in declining health, attended by an old Jewish nurse who used to come to the house regularly to administer injections, so my mother had entrusted her with constant attention to the patient.

As I bent over him, he said in a weak voice, "I am not sure of myself." That was a statement of some significance, for he had never suffered from any long-lasting illness and had great confidence in his health because of his moderation in his way of life. He indulged himself in nothing to excess, not in smoking or drinking or late nights. Naturally, in his youth and before he married he probably did some of the things that young men do, but always in moderation. Among the memories of her early married life that my mother recalled to me was the winter night that my father came in, and she smelled alcohol on his breath, so she shouted at him, "You're drunk!" He was so startled by the shout that he never in all his lifetime did the same again. He also gave up smoking, probably again under pressure from my forceful mother. About once a year only I saw him holding a large cigar which had been presented to him after an official lunch for some annual occasion. He also did a great deal of walking for exercise.

Had it not been for this chance disease, typhoid fever, caught from the polluted milk which was his only food after his teeth had been extracted, he would have been long-lived, as were his colleagues 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi and Lutfi al-Sayyid.

Yet he chose not to bind himself to any age: he had several ages, of which he chose whichever suited him, and he passed on to me this preference for freedom of choice. What we know is that he died at the age of sixty-five according to the official reckoning to which he had assented and on the basis of which his dealings with the Government were conducted, and at fifty-eight according to his other official age on the basis of which he dealt with the Gresham insurance company.

It so happened that an agent of this company had enticed him, convincing him of the advantages of a policy

which allowed borrowing on the capital sum the moment the first premium was paid. Without hesitation, he took out two policies on his life, one for five hundred pounds and the other for a thousand. He paid the first premium on each, and then not much else, he said, for he took to borrowing on the first to pay the premiums of the second and on the second to pay the premiums of the first, and so on.

We had doubts, of course, about how genuine these reported dealings were. In fact, when I went to the company with his papers after his death, I was surprised to be told after they had been checked that—God be praised!—the premiums had all been paid in full and on time, and so the sums for which he was insured were issued to us without deductions. This saved us from what would have been a certain predicament when we were hounded for the settlement of debts and of overdue bills for timber, bricks, tiles, and so on. The entire sum went into stopping that gap, that drain that went under the name of a house.

On his sick bed, my father beckoned to me. I approached him and he asked me in a weak voice about my mother. I told him she was at home and inquiring about his health. He whispered, "Give her greetings from me." The fact is that he did not expect her to be at his side in hospital, nor did he wish her to be. All through his lifetime he used to tell me in asides, "This mother of yours must never be told disturbing news, or be brought into a disturbing situation." Because of her excitable character, she could not stand such situations or control her nerves in them.

I myself used to fear nothing so much as that my mother should know that I was ill, for she then would fill the whole world with cries and clamor and complaints

and moans. She would not let the doctor get on with his duties, but pestered him with insistent questioning and vociferous anxiety, sometimes even with criticism and reproaches because recovery was slow to come. Nor did she spare me, the patient, for having exposed myself to the causes of the disease—all this at a time that called for calm and self-control, and silent, effective action.

For this reason, we thanked God that my father was left to the care of that nurse. But the illness persisted until it exhausted his body and strained his heart. I used to visit him in hospital every day. When he worsened and was near death, we asked the doctor whether it was advisable to get a second opinion. He said there was no longer any point. Besides, the hospital administration made it a condition that we pay five pounds in advance merely to be allowed to bring in a consultant. I lost my temper at this unreasonable procedure and saw it as an imposition and an exploitation of the situation, for the doctors we might bring in would be paid by us of course, so why and in return for what should the hospital get five pounds? In the throes of this emotional upheaval I refused.

To this moment I reproach myself for this refusal. What is all the money in the world worth when one is faced with a dying man—and what man? In the face of death I ought not to have quibbled about what is reasonable or unreasonable, or inquired about what is effective or ineffective. But such is my nature at times—God's curse upon it!

My father died with none of us at his side. I was at home, getting ready to go to him at visiting time when the telephone rang and the hospital gave us the news. When I entered his room, I found him stretched out on the bed with his face covered by a white sheet. The Jewish nurse told me that he had had a moment of clarity when he had

asked her for a glass of water, then he turned to the wall on which hung a small wooden crucifix, so he pointed to it and said to her in his weakening voice, yet trying to maintain his old tone of irony, "What say you—isn't it you people who cried, 'Crucify him'?" She laughed and turned to fill the glass, and when she went back to him, she found that his head had slipped off the pillow, and he had departed this life.

The nurse did not want to show me his face, but I insisted that she pull down the sheet so I may contemplate him, and what I saw was a face I shall not forget. Serenity, abstraction, exaltation above the level of earth—all these had imprinted themselves on a calm face without features, or perhaps these were the features of eternity.

I do not remember that I shed a single tear. The situation was too awesome for ordinary sentiments. I froze for a moment, and lost consciousness of myself. Then I recovered to be immediately assailed by the responsibilities of the moment.

I found my brother Zuhayr outside the room. He had been sent by my mother carrying a sum of money which he said she had given him to cover the costs of the funeral, then she had left for the country estate as her nerves could not stand the strain. I also had taken the precaution of bringing with me enough money from Cairo. My brother and I then began arranging the formalities of burial, but the measures we took betrayed extreme stupidity and ignorance of the proprieties.

The hospital administration told us, "The body is at your disposal." We replied, "Keep it until it is called for." They said, "It cannot be kept in the room, for this is to be emptied, disinfected, and made ready to receive new patients. What will happen in this case is that the body

will be removed and placed on a marble slab in a hall by the outer gate until you call for it." We let them do whatever they wanted to do and we went away thinking about the funeral.

On our way, we happened to meet an acquaintance. When he heard the news, he said that we had to make the death known in a hurry, and that the quickest way was to have small handbills printed and distributed to the city's cafés. It could all be done in a couple of hours. We entrusted him with that task.

Night had fallen, so my brother and I went home to a house which was empty and desolate, my mother having left and taken the servants with her. We were tired so we retired to sleep, or so we thought, for we were clearly in a state of anxiety and insomnia. Suddenly there was knocking at the door. We got up in a hurry, wondering who might be the caller at that hour of the night. We opened the door and there was our father's friend the architect Yusuf. He was ushered in, his face clouded with sorrow. We asked him how he had learned the news and he said it was from the handbills. He was sitting in the Commercial Cafe when these handbills were showered on the patrons. He took them to be—he told us—advertisements for some theater and was about to throw them away, when he saw that they announced the death of Isma'il al-Hakim. Sighing, he repeated the customary pious formulae: There is no power or might except in God; To God do we belong and to Him do we return.

He sank into silence for a moment, and we with him. Then he raised his head and swept the house with his gaze, inquiring where the body was being kept. When he learned from us that it was in the hospital and that the funeral would start there, the man was dumbfounded and said, "What nonsense is this? Has he no home to

come out from? Is he to emerge from a hospital like a nobody with no home no family, no fixed place of residence? That will never do. His funeral must start at his home. That is the proper thing to do." My brother explained, "We know nothing about this business of death," and I added, "All that occurred to us was how to shorten the way, and the shortest way is from the hospital to the graveyard."

The man shook his head ruefully, and asked whether we had notified the Governorate. When he learned that we had not, he exclaimed, "Good people, this is a man of some standing and position—a former consultant magistrate. The Governorate is sure to send some mounted soldiers to escort the coffin." I had to admit, "The truth, by God, is that I know nothing about such things. Thank God that you have arrived at the right time. We rely on you."

Immediately, this loyal and energetic friend got up, notified the Governorate by telephone, then communicated the news to the newspaper *al-Ahram*. When he had done that he returned to us asking, "In which hospital have you left the deceased?" Once he had the information, he got in touch with the ambulance service, then hurried away without giving us more attention.

An hour or two passed, then we heard the horn of the ambulance at our gate. I went down and opened the big garden gate, and in came our architect friend, followed by the ambulance men carrying the body, and in the moonlight they walked along the long terrace with steady, unhurried steps that had a majestic, dignified resonance on the tiles, in the awesome silence of the night. I felt as if it was Hamlet's body carried on warriors' shoulders.

The body was placed in one of the rooms of the separate wing. We had all agreed that the funeral proces-

sion should start at three o'clock in the afternoon of the next day, in order to give relatives and friends and acquaintances time to come after reading the notice in the morning. And as the appointed time approached, everything was in place. A canvas pavilion had been erected in front of the house, and the professionals who were to wash the body were brought in.

Our architect friend whispered to me that I ought to attend the washing. I did. It was an unforgettable sight. The body had begun to decompose, for twenty-four hours had elapsed, and we were at the beginning of summer. The washers tried to smother the smell by burning incense. Some relatives, in particular paternal uncles, thronged the place, and I saw them shed bitter tears at the sight, even some who had been estranged from my father in his lifetime. Yet my own tears would not flow any more than they might out of a rock, for I was in another vale . . . .

I was contemplating an extraordinary sight, seldom to be repeated, the sight of a face that I knew and loved going through odd and rapid transformations before my eyes. That nose that I well knew was altering in shape, for it had softened like a lump of dough. The belly had swollen like a balloon about to burst. My father's features were coming apart right before me, as the shape of a cloud in the sky breaks up into nothing. So 'annihilation' is not merely a word that is written on paper or rolling on people's tongues . . . . I was observing all this fascinated, and utterly forgetting that what I was observing was a father over whom I ought to weep.

Someone else was watching, but maintaining his own realistic point of view, and retaining his equanimity. It was the architect friend. He did not weep along with the others, but was issuing orders and instructions to the

washers, urging them to be thorough, ensuring that there was no rushing or stinting, shouting, "With loofah and soap, if you please! Let's have the soapsuds good and thick! The shoulder needs to be wiped unhurriedly. Over here the washing has been skimped. A job is a job and deserves full attention." In this manner was the architect supervising and directing everything, as if he were before a building overseeing its erection or repair!

The funeral procession finally set out from the house of the deceased on a Friday of May 1936, with an awesomeness, dignity, and stateliness I had not anticipated. Four cavalrymen on their fine horses rode beside the coffin, my brother and I walked behind it, and behind us was a great throng which I had not expected, nor do I know where it came from. Perhaps it consisted of acquaintances of my father's or beneficiaries of his unadvertized kindnesses. Then and only then did tears overwhelm me. I tried hard to control myself, not to break into sobs in the midst of people.

We reached the cemetery, the one where our family buried its dead, in the Manara area of Ramleh in Alexandria. The last one to have been buried there had been my grandmother. I remembered that when we had attended her funeral, the Qur'anic reciters attached to the cemetery, after they had performed the ritual reading of Scriptures and homily, and the gravediggers, after they had finished their task and leveled the soil, crowded round my father asking for payment, so he dug out of his pocket some piasters which he distributed right and left as he made his way among the hustling outstretched hands. Then as they outdid one another in shouting for more, he said in his serious, dignified tone mingled with almost indiscernible mockery, "Next time, next time!" Of

course he did not know, nor did anyone else present know, that the next time he would be the one to be buried.

Since that day, I have been thanking God that disposing of that big house had not been achieved in his lifetime, for he had some benefit from it at least the day he died.

13

I found nothing in the atmosphere that surrounded me in that house, in that distant summer of the early twenties, that stimulated me to any expenditure of energy, not even reading. It had been my intention to take advantage of the summer vacation to start working on a play on 'the new woman,' who had begun to discard the veil, especially after the famous women's demonstration, in which they had taken part wearing their white veils, and the police action in dispersing them.[108] One of the notable features of the 1919 Revolution was indeed the participation of women in it, for the first time in Egypt's history. It augured the approaching realization of Qasim Amin's dream manifested in his demand for the abolition of the veil.[109]

I had specific ideas about the future of women and the end of their seclusion, which I wanted to bring into prominence in a play. But for some days I was reduced to a state of apathy by the atmosphere of the house, by my fear that my parents might discover what I was engaged in, and by my discouragement, as I did not know what was happening to the plays I had already written. For in addition to *The Seal of Solomon*, about which no decision had been made known to me, there was the other play that I had written by myself and had entitled *The Groom*, which was a comedy without any songs. Zaki 'Ukasha had taken it to read some time earlier, and I did not know what he had done with it.

I made up my mind to write to Mustafa Mumtaz merely to have some news, any news about the theater, that might transport me if only for moments to a different atmosphere. Barely two days after I wrote, I received a reply—an ordinary letter with nothing obvious to catch my eye. But as soon as I opened the envelope, I spotted inside it a yellow postal money order! My heart missed a beat. The letter was from my friend Mustafa Mumtaz, and it said:

> Toward the end of June last I finally came to terms with Zaki 'Ukasha and signed an agreement, after enduring more from his trickery and his lies than can be estimated in money terms. If it wasn't that need drives one to extremes of patience and toleration concerning what you know or may not know, I would have torn up the play and severed all links with this luckless art.
>
> The agreement is for thirty pounds. One thing you need to know is that there is a clause in it that stipulates the money is to be returned if the play is not passed by the Censor. There is also another clause to the effect that damages of a hundred pounds are payable if the same play is given to another troupe.

As for *The Living Dead*—a play by a colleague of ours whose name I cannot now remember—I have seen wall posters advertizing it. For my part it looks as if I shall be collaborating with 'Abbas 'Allam on the story of Khalid ibn al-Walid,[110] although I would prefer to find myself an independent subject. These are the main news I have to give you.

Turning to your indolence in reading or anything else, it is not a role I see as befitting you. How wonderful it would be if you took advantage of your freedom from preoccupation and of the beautiful scenery around you to undertake a serious and enjoyable piece of work.

I hope to hear from you soon that you are launching into such a work.

With greetings from your devoted friend—Mumtaz.

The letter and the enclosed money order giving me my share restored to me hope and the will to work. I folded the money order with the utmost care until I could go to cash it, and rolled back my sleeves to get to work on *The New Woman*.

I happened to be leafing through one of the journals of the time that gave news about theaters and their plans for the next season when I saw advertisements for both *The Groom* and *The Seal of Solomon* among the premieres of the 'Ukasha troupe. I was now sure that *The Groom* had been accepted and was perhaps being rehearsed without waiting for a signed agreement, for Zaki 'Ukasha used to treat authors as if they had no existence or no importance. In fact none of us had ever turned down the fee offered or demanded the withdrawal of his play. We were always humble and took what was put down before us: it was enough for us to see our works staged. We were all hard-working amateurs. If we expected any payment, it was not in order to get fat or to turn away hunger, but merely to make us feel that we existed and had some importance

in our own eyes, and that we were doing something serious for which there was a demand. The work was above all a joy to us and flooded our hearts with happiness and pleasure. We had not the conceit, or even the self-confidence, to think that we were making a mark in the history of the Egyptian theater. The word 'HISTORY' in capital letters, the words 'LITERATURE' and 'ART' in the weighty senses in which they were subsequently mouthed with pride and with the feeling that one was fulfilling a major mission—none of this was known among us at the time.

Besides, writing for the theater at that juncture—and much the same applied to literary and intellectual production—was largely a matter of translation, Egyptianization, and Arabization. An Egyptianized foreign play was said to be an 'adaptation',[111] just as a foreign novel freely translated, as was done by al-Manfaluti, was said to be Arabized—Arabization was the term prevalent in prose literature, and Egyptianization in the theater. The word 'adaptation' was not used in a strict philological sense. Rather, in the currency of the time, it indicated that a play was neither entirely an original piece of writing nor entirely a translation. It was the transposition of a theme from one atmosphere to another, and the transformation of the characters from foreign to Egyptian or Eastern ones. Egyptianized adaptation was on the lines of the plays of Nagib al-Rihani, Badi' Khayri, al-Kassar, Amin Sidqi, 'Abbas 'Allam, Sulayman Nagib,[112] and my own *The Groom*; and Easternized adaptation was on the lines of *The Ten of Diamonds* by the late Mahmud Taymur,[113] some of Ibrahim Ramzi's[114] plays, and our own *Seal of Solomon*.

The wonder is that there was at the time an instinctive sense of the necessity of artistic honesty. If the advertise-

ments of those plays were reviewed, it would be seen that under the title appeared the words 'Borrowed by So-and-So.' I still have some of the red, green, yellow handbills advertizing *The Groom* and *The Seal of Solomon*, and beneath the title were printed the words 'Adapted by the Pen of So-and-So.' None of us would allow himself to write the words 'written by . . .' unless that was what he actually had done, or unless the degree of inventiveness or original effort expended brought it within the range of authorship. If on the other hand the play was actually a translation, then the name of the foreign author was invariably mentioned in all the advertisements, no matter what the standing of the translator or Arabizer might be. Al-Manfaluti in his Arabization of novels, and 'Uthman Galal and Muhammad Mas'ud[115] with regard to plays, were always extremely punctilious in giving prominence to the original author whose work was being translated or Arabized. If on the other hand that was not appropriate—because the changes made virtually transformed it from one thing to something else—then it was deemed enough to use the words 'adapted by the pen of . . . .

It happened that 'Abbas 'Allam wanted to free himself from this word 'adaptation' which had gained currency, so he coined—and it may be he was the first to do it—a vague formula that can carry several significations when used by itself. Under the titles of his plays, he would write the words 'from the pen,' without the word 'adaptation' which in Arabic usually precedes them, so left matters undecided, to be interpreted as best one could: was it authorship or adaptation that flowed from the pen of . . . ? At first critics made fun of this device, and among themselves dubbed its creator ''Abbas 'Allam from the pen,' until it became common among all writers and came to be looked upon as natural.

The practice of adaptation rendered a worthwhile service to the Egyptian theater in its earliest stage, for it trained writers in the most difficult aspect of play writing, which is characterization. The theme adapted was not in itself of major importance. Shakespeare, Molière, and Goethe borrowed themes. What is truly important in the theater is inventing the dialogue and recreating the characters in a live, new, original way. The Egyptian 'adapter' had not yet reached that stage, which in the theater is among the highest reaches of creativity. His efforts were directed to another aspect, also important in his artistic development. That was just weaving an Egyptian atmosphere and tinging the foreign character with a local color. The effort that 'Uthman Galal exerted in Egyptianizing Molière's *Tartuffe* into his *al-Shaykh Matluf*, for example, is sensed by the spectator from the first moment.

This was an inevitable step in writing for the Egyptian and the Arab theater, but it is strange to see that in the European and the American theater, adaptation has now become the great novelty of the age. Many of the important productions now on the stages of the great capitals are adaptations by dramatists of well-known, successful plays. It may surprise us to find, for example, that an author such as Sartre has undertaken the adaptation of *Representative Kean*, originally by another French writer, Alexandre Dumas Père, or that Jean Cocteau has adapted an American play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. If we were to survey the English, the German, or the American theater, we would find the same phenomenon.

Yet adaptation in Europe and in America, which is called redrafting or acclimatization or a 'new version,' is confined to changes in the dialogue necessitated by dif-

ferences in the sense of humor or the character of irony or similes and proverbs and the like between one country and another. Adaptation or redrafting or acclimatization there is limited to making the original text acceptable to the receiving country. It does not extend to altering the atmosphere or the names of characters, because the atmospheres in Europe and America are broadly similar.

Theatrical adaptation with us is therefore, in some circumstances, more complicated than it is abroad. It can be half-creation, especially in those distant days when we were writing before the abolition of the veil. In the sexually segregated society of our time, we had to alter the social relations which existed between men and women in an unsegregated one. When adapting a foreign play in which a man and a woman met, we were getting into a can of worms. How could we put on an Egyptian stage a man and a woman face to face if they were not related? We could not make the wife of So-and-So 'unveil herself' before the husband of Such-and-Such. We had various devices for getting round these difficulties, such as making the woman the man's cousin on the paternal or maternal side. All the men and women in the plays of that time were interrelated—let anyone who cares check!

Such changes in social relations in accordance with the dictates of our environment in turn dictated changes in the dialogue, in characterization, and in some of the action, building up into substantial differences from the original, and making the meaning of 'adaptation' for us quite different from the meaning it has in the European or the American theater. This activity was therefore tantamount to a school for the training of our dramatists, and an opportunity afforded to whoever wished it to spread his wings so he might fly on his own in the future.

Each of us who wrote for the theater had a favorite European author whose work he adapted. 'Aziz 'Id, for example, was fond of Georges Feydeau; he translated his most important works word for word, and he staged them without any change, the characters appearing as Europeans, hats and all. I on the other hand admired another vaudeville writer called Albin Valabrègue.[116] It was from him that I adapted *The Groom*. Valabrègue remained for me one of the giants of the humorous stage until I went to France, and found to my surprise that he was an obscure writer with no place among the big names that glittered in the literary world. He had by then grown old and retired. Then, once, while running through the *Temps* I spotted just two lines on the back page reporting that "Monsieur Albin Valabrègue, vaudeville writer and author of several plays, has died at the age of eighty." I said to myself, "My God! Is that all there is to Albin Valabrègue?" I bowed my head in sorrow and wished him eternal rest, and was perhaps the only one among the millions of human beings on the face of this earth who grieved for him.

That was one phase of writing for the theater in Egypt. As for actual creative writing, it did not begin seriously for me until after I had been to Europe and drunk at the true springs of culture and of the actual formation of my intellectual make-up.

The wonder is that in Paris I did not continue along the line I had followed in Egypt, the line of humor, vaudeville, operetta—the popular theater in general. These were represented in France in what were called the theaters of the Boulevard, comparable with our own 'Imad al-Din Street, with its places of entertainment, its plays, its writers commanding success before huge audiences. What happened was that I lost interest in this

easy kind of art. I was not tempted by the ready and certain success it offered. I followed a new direction, with a different caravan of playwrights, authors, and producers who were effecting an innovative revolution against the other, successful way. It was the caravan of Ibsen, Pirandello, Bernard Shaw, Maeterlinck, playwrights and authors who encountered extreme difficulties in holding a large public at the time, because they had turned their backs on the usual ways of earning applause in order to blaze new trails. If they triumphed later, it was thanks to groups of cultured people who neither weakened nor despaired in commending their art.

I did not see them triumph during my stay in Paris. I saw them while they were engaged in a desperate struggle. I saw Ibsen performed in a small theater, before a sparse audience, and for only a few days. I saw Saint Joan, the most recent of Bernard Shaw's plays, shown for the first time in Paris before a small public half of whom could not make head or tail of it. No one in Paris had dared to present it except the bold Russian actor and producer George Pitoëff.[117] He came forward before the curtain was raised with a statement and a warning, pleading for our patience, using an expression which I still remember: that in such plays one is 'walking on a tightrope.' As for Pirandello, he too was the talk of the Parisian élite. His plays were being produced for the first time, and they caused heads to turn in amazement and disbelief; all one could hear in the theater was whispers: "Do you understand anything?" "No." "Neither do I!"

What is it that has swept me into this company? What has inveigled me into this ordeal? What has distanced me from the lights of easy success, the popular success of the Boulevard? I do not know. Perhaps it is truly a tendency of mine in both life and art. I do find myself sometimes

choosing the hard way and leaving the known, familiar way which leads to assured success. Perhaps also it is the rational, intellectual tendency of my father's, which finally found in the new theatrical creeds based on the intellect the right set-up in which to manifest itself.[118] Perhaps.

For all that, this tendency in me had no difficulty in settling down within our literary environment, for this environment was ready to receive it, and did in fact receive it well. Not so the theatrical environment, which was in a different world, especially at the time I returned from abroad. For good translations had disappeared, and the Egyptian theater was swept by two currents, one of laughter, the other of tears.

A third current, of the intellect, was needed. That was why the National Company was founded in 1935. Its management was entrusted to the poet Khalil Mutran, and its artistic direction to the producer Zaki Tulaymat[119] after his return from a period of training in Paris. It was inaugurated with my play *The People of the Cave*,[120] followed by *The Merchant of Venice* translated by Khalil Mutran, *Antigone*, translated by Taha Husayn,[121] *King Lear* translated by Ibrahim Ramzi, and so on.

These plays were attacked because of their high cultural standard. The fact is that the presentation of all these plays in one go, in a large theater, and in such a serious, dry artistic framework shook the public and shocked them. With the help of the oscillating political parties, the attack succeeded in putting an end to the direction taken by the Company. In reality, the fault lay in putting all these difficult plays before a wide public one after the other, something which had not been done even in Europe. They should have been produced in a special avant-garde theater, with a limited number of seats for cultured

patrons. If that had been done from that date and this small avant-garde theater had continued to function in a quiet corner, away from the storms, until it had rooted itself and developed over these intervening years, creating a serious theatrical environment as part of the cultural current we had in mind, breeding its own authors, producers, actors, and public, we would today be in a different situation, and even the large popular theaters would long ago have developed and reached a new level. But we fought the battle on a wider field than we should have done, before a public mostly accustomed to varieties of easy entertainment catered for by powerful enemies who took the new trend to be a challenge to their existence.

Yes, the inauguration of the National Company was in fact the beginning of a battle. One piece of evidence is the letter which the newspaper *al-Ahram* published on 18 December 1935 under the title 'From the author of *The People of the Cave* to the Director of the National Company.' It may be useful to reproduce it here. It read:

> My dear Khalil Mutran,
>
> I want to record in writing my congratulations to you on this great triumph. I saw the inaugural play on its fourth night, and I perceived that what was at stake was not a play or a company, but the establishment of a theatrical form that was not previously current in Egypt or in the Arab East. What our public knew was that theaters were frequented for the sake of cheap, ephemeral enjoyment, not for lasting intellectual pleasure. Even the plays of Shakespeare and their like were watched not for their own sake, not for their dialogue, but for the songs and the tunes injected into them, or for some exciting scenes that stirred people's senses but without their intellects being in the least affected by the literary dialogue.
>
> So it was until the master of the two crafts[122] seized the reins, as if Fate had willed that he should also be

master of a third, and demonstrated to people in a decisive battle that acting is nothing but a glorious chapter in the book of high literature.

Yes, it was a battle. Not between me and the public, as was said by our friend Dr. Taha Husayn (in the newspaper *al-Jihad*), but between you and the older, outdated form of acting. The victory was yours. And with your triumph, true art triumphed. So let me congratulate you once again, and congratulate your excellent assistants and interpreters of your thought, as well as the directors and actors of the brilliant National Company.

With greetings,
Your devoted
Tawfiq al-Hakim
Cairo, 17 December 1935.

14

The summer vacation ended, and I returned to Cairo carrying the rough copy of *The New Woman*, complete. October was approaching, so I found the Azbakiyya Theater a hive of activity, rehearsing *The Seal of Solomon*, *The Groom*, and a third musical play entitled *The World and All in It* by Shaykh Yunus al-Qadi, who had been the resident writer in Munira al-Mahdiyya's company, but had left it for the 'Ukashas. He had also written a song that was very well-known at the time, beginning:

> Lower the blind before us
> Or your neighbors will defame us.

Perhaps he was the only one who did not adapt foreign plays, because he knew no language other than his native one. His plays were therefore a succession of

singing scenes without any linkage or logic, but they served to provide the framework for situations that called for singing.

Naturally, my own interest was in my play *The Groom*. Zaki 'Ukasha had adjudged me for it—a judgment wherefrom there was no appeal—a fee of twenty pounds only on the grounds that it contained no songs and that I was the sole author and had no partner to share with. As for *The Seal of Solomon*, its rehearsals were over. Kamil al-Khula'i came to Mustafa Mumtaz and me and asked, "Do you like the tunes I composed?" Of course we answered, "Yes, we do." So he stretched out his hand and said, "Now for the tip!" And by God he would not leave until he had extracted from us a pound, contributed on a fifty-fifty basis, and he gave us a receipt which read:

> I have received from Messrs. Mustafa and Tawfiq, the authors of the play *The Seal of Solomon*, one hundred piasters as a reward for the high quality of the tunes I composed for their play, and this is the receipt.
>
> 11 November 1924
> Kamil al-Khula'i
> Composer for *The Seal of Solomon*

Why this receipt? No one required it of him. But I still keep among my papers this strange document, hand written by that great composer who was famous in his day. And what a difference it reveals between that artist and today's, who owns buildings and a car!

I forgot to mention that *The Seal of Solomon* was not actually my first musical play. Before I got to know Mustafa Mumtaz but after I bought the volume already mentioned of Alfred de Musset's plays, which was entitled *Comédies et Proverbes*, I picked out of it a comedy entitled *Carmosine* and extracted from it an entire musical

play, an opera, which I put in a pharaonic setting and called *Aminusa*. I put part of it into verse, but then lost interest in it, so a classmate of mine in the School of Law—Muhammad al-Sa'id Khudayr, Vice-President of the Council of State, retired—took it over to complete the versification. I knew nothing of what he had done with it until he notified me that he had entrusted it to the 'Ukashas. There was some dispute over it with Sayyid Darwish who, it was said, had demanded a huge sum of money to set it to music, so it was handed over to Kamil al-Khula'i, and again there were some disputes, as is recorded in some notes which Kamil al-Khula'i wrote in his own hand on a piece of paper that is also in my keeping. It reads:

> I have returned this play to the troupe of the Management of the Company for the Advancement of Arab Acting after I had composed the music for half an act, in part because we had not agreed on a fee and in part because its performers do not take up the singing of their roles until the greater part is lost because of the great lapse of time.
>
> 1 March 1923
> Kamil al-Khula'i
> Musician, Cairo.
>
> It has been handed to me again on 10 December 1924, but only after what I had composed was totally lost. I shall resume composing with care and deliberation. I shall strive to have it out before the public after a period of six months from today's date, because it needs revision of its versification, and originality in muscial composition.
>
> 10 December 1924
> Kamil al-Khula'i
> Musician, Cairo.

I do not know what was finally done with this play, nor did I care to find out. I never met Kamil al-Khula'i after he collected a pound in equal shares from my partner and me. But the play was not produced, and energies must have been diverted to other plays, for competition between the different companies was keen that season. I wonder how Cairo at that time was able to support all those theatrical companies of various kinds, without grants or attention from the State.

The artist in those days had a rough time, being ignored or condemned; but he stood firm. For the spirit of art, the burning, luminous torch in the depths of him warmed and illumined his hard life. The encouragement of an informed public was enough for him. And the public went to the theater because it found no alternative. Egyptian films—silent at first, talking later—had not yet come to the fore.

The popularity of the cinema did affect the theater, even in Europe, at first. But the crowds soon returned to the theater when it developed new channels of communication, demonstrating that its character is different from that of the cinema, even when the latter talks.

One of the signs of the flourishing of the Egyptian theater was the success of the Ramsis Company, which had been recently created. Its founder Yusuf Wahbi was able to hold his ground in drama in confrontation with George Abyad's eminence in tragedy. He produced some valuable, outstanding plays such as *The Lady of the Camelias* which brought into prominence the genius of that great actress Rose al-Yusuf.[123] Even more indicative of the development of the theater then was the fact that the same play could be presented at the same time on different stages. For 'Aziz 'Id had left the Ramsis Company, and in partnership with Fatima Rushdi he had founded a rival

company producing the same kind of play. So one day we witnessed a unique event in our country: both companies staging the same play in the same week. I think it was *L'Aiglon*[124] or perhaps *Julius Caesar*—I cannot remember exactly, but what matters is that the public was not impatient but welcomed such magnificent artistic rivalry, and went to both performances to watch and to compare.

In order to stand up to the competition, the 'Ukasha Company had to specialize in some particular genre, and it did—in the operetta and the opera, or in the play distinctively Egyptian in diction and Eastern in atmosphere. Al-Rihani and al-Kassar gave their attention to the farce and the spectacular.

Both *The Groom* and *The Seal of Solomon* were staged in 1924. I was careful at first to omit my family name from the advertisements, in order not to attract the attention of my parents. Especially in the earliest notices, my name appeared as 'Husayn Tawfiq' and nothing else. So for a while my parents remained unaware of my activities in that field and that milieu.

I had scarcely done with offering *The New Woman* to the 'Ukasha Company before I started writing a musical play, an operetta, *'Ali Baba*. I sent it in from abroad. The composition of the music was entrusted to Zakariyya Ahmad and the versification—at my request—to Badi' Khayri. I had made a start with the versification, but may not have sent in what I had done because I lacked the opportunity of contact with the composer, for I had gone to France after having my name inscribed in the register of lawyers.

Even while I was at Law school, there were no indications of any inclination toward this profession on my part—I who kept company only with artists, even in my student days. I used to attend rehearsals day after day,

often without leaving the stage all day, in fact wishing that I could be stuck to it, with its minimal lighting and maximal hubbub, in front of an auditorium deserted and drowned in darkness during the day. Everything before me seemed exuberant and dazzling. I even enjoyed following and taking part in the artists' problems.

Our leading lady and principal singer in *The Seal of Solomon* could not read or write, so someone was appointed to teach her her role. I sometimes saw her in some corner in the wings or on the stage[125] being taught her lines word by word, like a hen whose food is being thrown before her one grain at a time. At the same time the composer Kamil al-Khula'i would be rehearsing the group songs and shouting at the conductor (who at the time was the very able 'Abd al-Hamid 'Ali), "Mr. 'Abd al-Hamid, Sir! Your music is in one corner and my composition in another!" The quarrel between them would wax hot, and al-Khula'i would turn to me and appeal, "Now you bear witness to the truth, Tawfiq Effendi!"

I was often on my own during morning rehearsals, because my partner Mustafa Mumtaz could not play truant from his job in the Ministry of the Interior as I could from the School of Law, so I alone had to take the brunt of the artistic madness of this genial composer, who every now and then would shout, "Settle my brain with a cigarette, or I swear by your honor that I will stop work today!" And rather than have the rehearsals of our play interrupted, I used to buy a packet of cigarettes at my own expense in readiness for just such crises. As for *The Groom*, where there was no singing, its rehearsals ran smoothly except one day when I noticed that the part of a barber in it was being performed particularly well, and by someone I had not seen before in the company. I inquired about him and was told he was a real barber with a shop

nearby, and had been hired as providing an easy solution to a problem. I shouted, "Suppose that on the day of the performance he is shaving a customer in his shop, will he leave the customer's chin unshaved to come and play the part? Or if we take the play on tour in the provinces, will he shut his shop and travel with you?" They calmed me down, laughing and saying, "When that happens, the Lord will provide an answer!" To this day I do not know whether they were serious or having me on.

Attending these rehearsals provided me with some of the most pleasant moments of my life at the time. To me, no company equaled that of those artists, even when we were not linked by any joint activity or by a play. Not a day passed while I was still in Egypt when I did not go to the 'Ukasha troupe to sit with the actors and composers. I remember that one day I was with the famous composer Dawud Husni, chatting about the opera *Samson and Delila*. It was the first entire opera in Arabic, and it was very well received. It is truly wonderful that at that time a play entirely in song, without any spoken dialogue, could be successfully produced.

Dawud Husni was listening to me while humming one of the songstress Naima al-Misriyya's songs when suddenly he turned round to me and said, "Think up a few words of your own for Na'ima al-Misriyya," and he kept urging me to write some songs for her band. I did not respond with any enthusiasm, but just to please him I started making up a song of the kind common in that day. It began, as I recall, with:

> Handsome and yet . . . quick to forget,
> Her love is always under threat.

He nodded and said, "Pretty! Go on!" But I did not go on, and never completed it. I returned instead to our conversation about the opera.

In his conversation, his features, and his dress he was the opposite of Kamil al-Khula'i. There was a look of such equanimity and dignity on him as almost to exclude him from the artist type. He was more like a high and highly respected official. But the conversation had only to turn to music and out of him would burst all the latent energies of an artist.

He brought out of his pocket a booklet which he told me was a new opera he had been asked to set to music. I took it out of his hand and saw that it was a pharaonic opera entitled *Cleopatra's Night*, written by Husayn Fawzi.[126] Dawud Husni added that it been handed to him after Kamil al-Khula'i had refused to write the music for it, because the versification did not fit in with al-Khula'i's idea of what poetry should be. He was used to lyrics on the lines of Farah Antun's,[127] in the grandiloquent manner of:

> If hand and brand guard not my kingdom
> Then am I no longer Saladin!

The verses in *Cleopatra's Night*, on the other hand, often consisted of very short lines of not more than two words, yet stretching to cover a whole page. When Kamil al-Khula'i saw this he burst out, "How can this be set to music? It's not a poem, it's a tram line!"

He failed to see, whereas Dawud Husni did, that such metrical forms make possible the composition of freer tunes, more compatible with the nature of opera. It seems also that Kamil al-Khula'i did not thumb through the remaining pages, or he would have noticed the variations in form, in meter, and in rhyme. As I read further into the libretto, I wondered at Kamil al-Khula'i's rejection of such a good piece of work. No doubt my past experience and previous practice in versifying the pharaonic opera

Aminusa made me better qualified than others to judge such a libretto. I was so engrossed in it that I lost awareness of what was around me until Dawud Husni alerted me with, "What's going on? Is it you who are entrusted with setting it to music, or I?" So I returned it to him, commending it to his best efforts.

I also inquired about the author, whose name I had not heard before, and he promised he would point him out to me when he came to the theater. And he did one day point to someone coming through the door, saying, "There, Sir, is the author." I looked and saw a clean-shaven young man wearing a very broad Lavallière tie such as is favored by Romantic painters and musicians. He truly looked the part of an artist, and closest to a painter or a musician.

I on the other hand had none of the marks of an artist except a shaved upper lip—that was the badge of the artist then, for no one else dared to shave his mustache. It happened once that an acquaintance of mine who did not belong to the artistic set met me, stared at my face and cried, "Where is your mustache?" Someone who knew my interests answered, "He is posing as an artist, Sir!" For growing a mustache, twisting it, and twirling it was the seemingly natural and the customary thing to do. As for whoever shaved it off, he was a rebel against the norm, mired in the company of artists, God forfend!

I do not remember that I spoke to Husayn Fawzi that day. We passed each other like distant phantoms or shadows cast upon a wall, until we met in Paris and became friends.

He was Dr. Husayn Fawzi, a graduate of the School of Medicine, committed to Science. I was a graduate of the School of Law, committed to the Law. We had come to Paris, he to delve further into Science, I to delve further into Law. He was able to combine Science with literature

and art, especially music. I was not able to give my time to Law, for literature and art carried me away, until I came to devote myself to them entirely.

15

I was within two months of the examination for the *licence*, and I had not started studying in earnest. I had left the household that had once held several uncles some two years earlier, because the one who was a teacher was getting married. I had found myself a small dwelling in Shubra, and there my younger brother Zuhayr soon joined me.

He had come to join the school run by the Jesuit fathers in Khoronfish, in preparation for the Certificate of General Education. He had started his primary education in Muharram Bey School in Alexandria, but he had soon had to leave it. The reason was that this school was at the time—wonder of wonders!—the only state primary school serving Alexandria and all its suburbs. As the family home was at the far end of Ramleh, he had to get up at five

in the morning in the bitter cold of winter to get to school shortly before eight. The resulting strain forced him to leave this school and join one nearer, in the part of Ramleh known as Bacos. It was of course a foreign school. It had no secondary section, so when he had gone through the primary stage, he had to enroll in the Jesuit School in Khoronfish.

He lodged with me, and we hired a servant to see to the cooking and to our other needs. Neither of my parents could come and live with us in Cairo, because of their involvement in demolition and in building, in agricultural land and mortgages.

We lived on our own, therefore. My brother was no more serious in his studies than I was, his inclination being toward learning to dance and attending dancing parties. I was amazed at his daring in frequenting the biggest hotels like the Continental to dance with whoever it was he danced with, and with no more than five piasters in his pocket. I caught him one evening scissors in hand, cutting up one of my black socks to make himself a bow-tie in order to walk boldly into the Continental, where a big ball requiring evening dress was being held. I said to him in alarm, "Do you walk in just like that to dance, when I shake with fear just stepping in front of that hotel? Besides, where is the money you need to get in?" He brought out of his pocket a silver five piaster coin and said, smiling calmly, "It is simplicity itself. I sit at any table, cross my legs, and order a fizzy lemonade. Together with the tip, it costs me not more than five piasters—and then I can stay dancing the whole night." I always envied my brother his cheek.

In France, he managed even more wonderfully. He caught up with me there after he had finished his secondary education in Khoronfish and had come to study

agriculture in Toulouse. He used to visit me in Paris during the New Year and Easter vacations. I was then deeply immersed in books, struggling at the peak of a demanding cultural battle, and was appalled to see him dropping in on me and, when I was not looking, appropriating my one new suit for which I had scrimped and saved a whole year long and which I had not yet worn. He went for a walk on the Champs Elysées and came back with two charming girls, asking me to see to the dinner since he was my guest in Paris. I signaled to him that money was in short supply and whispered, "Getting women is easy. Getting them dinner is not." To win me round he said, "Did I do wrong in thinking of you? Of course one of them is for you. You choose whichever you like; to me they are all the same."

Yet for all the women that he got to know, my brother never experienced love—I mean love as I understood it and as it is understood by imaginative and emotional people. Just as he never once in his life intoned a single line of poetry, so his heart never caught fire with what we call love.

Also he could not bear to stay long in any one city. Contrary to me, who never moved away from Paris, he had gone to Grenoble before going to Toulouse, and he later went to Strasbourg and then Lilles—and in each city he had adventures. He was also an alarmingly heavy smoker, whereas I have never had a cigarette in my mouth. And he cared a great deal about his clothes whereas I have never carried a silk handkerchief or worn a glove even in the coldest of winter. I have never spoiled myself with ownership of any of these pretty things.

We met once in a European summer resort after he was grown up and engaged in agriculture. When I got off the train—he having preceded me and come to meet me

at the station—he was surprised to find me carrying only one bag filled with books, and with only one suit, which was the one I was wearing. He took me to his hotel where I found his bags filled with about six suits of different colors, several pairs of fine shoes, and an entire collection of costly silk ties. He always traveled with all these clothes.

Since his student days in France he had become an expert poker player. There was in Paris then a clique of Egyptian malcontents who were semi-exiled and had forced themselves into a kind of gambling gang to prey upon wealthy Egyptians coming on vacation. I and some serious colleagues knew the café where they congregated and avoided them as best we could. But this brother of mine dropped in on them—I do not know how it came about—so they rejoiced and looked forward to stripping him of what he had. But within an hour it was he who had cleaned them out and left them half demented.

He also distinguished himself in swimming a long time ago—whereas I never learned to swim—and was close to becoming a champion if he had not been hit by asthma. Again he was very skillful at shooting, and almost became one of the best in the hunting club but was disabled by illness. I wished I had his outgoing nature. In addition, he was sharp in observation, quick in understanding, and of penetrating intelligence. I could detect these qualities in his opinions about anything connected with his immediate concerns, such as agriculture, and about the various groups of people that he associated with or came across in his life.

It is he who should have been the artist, and I the farmer. Had this happened, art in our country would have been the richer in true creativity. Circumstances did not bring us together often. We did not correspond and

did not visit each other even at times of serious illness. Yet that did not affect the love we had each for the other.

The longest period of association we had was the one that I am talking about here, when we shared that small dwelling in Shubra. Each of us went about his business on his own. I have no recollection of how or when he revised his lessons or in what circles he went dancing, for toward the end of the year I could not tell my head from my feet. Doubts had begun to assail me: could I really get my *licence* that year having wasted most of its months between theaters and among artists and composers? And if I did not, how could I show my face to my parents? If they found out that art was the cause, the catastrophe would be all the greater. All our witty friends who were acquainted with our conditions and my and my brother's trifling used to shake their heads at our abysmal failure and say sarcastically, "By God, Isma'il al-Hakim is to be pitied. What a progeny he has sired and left to the world!"

My brother read what I had written about him here and he laughed. He decided to wait until we met during the following summer to add some of his own memories, but he died just one month before I was due to meet him. It was as if what I had written about him was an obituary. I went to him and found him stretched out on his deathbed. His eyes were half-closed, and under the partly lowered eyelids I could detect the usual glint, but it was a lifeless glint. I also noticed that there was a slight parting of his lips as if in a smile—yes, it was his ironic smile, and it was as if he were mocking death. I seemed to hear him say with his old brightness, "I don't get this business of death!" His heart suddenly failed and death took him unawares just before he was brought a cup of tea. With someone like him who did not believe in death even during his long, chronic illness, death had no alter-

native but to take him by surprise. And yet that smile seemed to me to be saying to death, "Even so . . . ." May God rest his soul.

For the remaining two months before the examination, I found only one way of confining my activities solely to my books, to absorb what was in them or die; that was literally to confine myself to the house, never stepping over its threshold for the whole of the two months.

My room had a window that looked onto a room in a building nearby, and after a while I realized that the occupant of that room was Hilmi Bahgat Badawi, my classmate in the School of Law. From my room, I could see his shape bent over his books under a lamp, studying the prescribed material with assiduity and determination. So whenever weariness seemed to be getting the better of me and slumber nagged at my eyelids, when my head bumped against the book before me because I had suddenly dropped off, when this cursed self[128] tempted me to abandon everything and go to bed uttering a curse on the *licence* and all the trouble it entailed, the shade of Hilmi Bahgat Badawi loomed before me, solid as a rock, hardy and stubborn in his application to work and study. I would then get hold of myself and return to my books saying, "As long as this colleague is keeping his vigil, how can I sleep when I need every single hour more than he does?"

In fact Hilmi Bahgat Badawi had no need of such an effort at the end of the year, for he had worked steadily from the start, with nothing to distract him. We were not friends as yet, merely acquaintances, our relationship having started with an earlier casual encounter in the 'Abbasiyya Secondary School in Alexandria. As I remember, he attracted attention because he was so young. He therefore did not belong to our group, nor was there

anything to strengthen the link between us in the School of Law. On the contrary, ties between students were weakened by the freedom we encountered in institutes of higher learning, and even more so by the freedom I allowed myself in attending or not because of my preoccupations with art. Friendships and cliques were formed solely on the basis of similarities in age, size, tendencies, tastes, and inclinations.

All I knew about him then was what everyone knew: that he was one of the five top, outstanding, gifted students who had maintained their precedence in all the previous annual examinations. I used to look up to him and his peers from a distance, as if at some supernatural manifestations, my plight seeming to take tongue and say, "If only you would bestow on us one tenth of what is in your heads, just so we pass . . . ."

Hilmi Bahgat Badawi was not the ordinary kind of young pupil I came across in secondary school, the kind that would dillydally on the way home after classes and join a sock-ball team[129] in the open space by the school.

As a child, I was not myself inclined to play such games, my own favorite being a game of 'semaphore switchman.' When we lived in Damanhur in a house overlooking the railway line, my room was close to the signals cabin, so I put up on the outside a piece of wood which I painted in the colors of the semaphore, and when I saw the real semaphore lowered to allow a train to pass, I used to open mine too. The real signalman noticed what I was doing and laughed, and made it his practice before signaling trains on to look toward me first and wink, as much as to say, "Watch out! The train is in sight. 'Open the way' to it." That game suited me in my childhood. It filled me with pleasure and delight and also with pride as I imagined that I was really 'opening the way' to a train.

Games which involved running, however, did not attract me much. It seems that my parents noticed this, for they were surprised one afternoon to see me running about with the neighbors' children. They looked into the phenomenon and discovered that I was doing so as a means to another end: I was fishing for an invitation to a wedding celebration the neighbors were having, at which songs and comic skits were to be performed by folk singers and actors.

Similarly, I did not take to such pastimes as backgammon. My father, when getting on in years, tried in a café to teach me backgammon, which he knew as he knew everything else, just to kill time, for I happened to be with him as he was waiting for a broker; but I could never understand it or take a liking to it. Even with friends of mine later on—their enthusiasm for backgammon never enticed me. I used to let them play, pretending that I was observing them, and give myself free rein to think of other things. Perhaps my habit of day-dreaming derives from this. On the contrary, I used sometimes to try to persuade them to abandon backgammon for a more fruitful kind of competition in the form of a debate on some subject or other.

I imagined at one time that I had become interested in billiards, on the ground that one can play it while thinking of something else. That was a mistake. Every game ought to be played for itself and with all one's faculties. In that also I failed. It is one of the biggest errors of my life that I never took to a game. It has left my life dry and bare. As for sports and physical exercise at school, they did not attract me either. On my way out of school, I used to pass by the enthusiasts of sock-ball without stopping to watch, until one afternoon Hilmi Bahgat Badawi barred my way saying, "Come and play goal-keeper in our team. We are

one short." I tried to excuse myself explaining that I did not know the game, but he said that it was extremely simple: I had only to stand between two stones that marked the goal, and stop the ball from going in between them. Before I could answer, he and his team had surrounded me and literally deposited me in their goalmouth.

The game waxed hot before me, waves of opponents clashed, elbowing each other, passing the ball with their feet. The game got more furious yet, the hubbub rose, pressure increased on the goal I was defending. Dust was stirred up, dirtying clothes. It rose so that it blinded my eyes and filled my nostrils, so I abandoned the goal to whoever might look after it[130] and walked away cursing the silly game and mocking those who played it. In the midst of the raiding and the battling, no one noticed that the goal was void and empty, with no keeper in it other than God! But Hilmi Bahgat's eye soon spotted me, so he approached me saying gently, "Please! This is a serious game and the result matters to us. It wouldn't do for us to be beaten with you as our goalkeeper." His words touched me, so I rose and assured him, "Have no fear. We are not going to be beaten. The ball will never enter our goal." I did resume my place between the two stones marking the goal, but at each attack I moved the stones further away without anyone noticing, so our goal became an ambulant, itinerant one, never to be reached by the opponent's ball.

That was the first form that my relationship with Hilmi Bahgat Badawi took. But our real friendship began only in France. He got there a few months after me, in a batch which included Mustafa al-Qulali who was later to be Dean of the Faculty of Law, one of the legislators of criminal law and a great advocate, and 'Abd al-Hakim al-

Rifa'i, who became Governor of the National Bank and then of the Central Bank. Bonds of friendship were soon to bind three of us in particular, so that in Paris we became known to colleagues sent by the School of Law at the same time or shortly afterward as the indivisible trinity, consisting of Hilmi Bahgat Badawi, Mustafa al-Qulali, and myself.

What bound the three of us, all of us working for a doctorate in Law, was what went beyond the law. Hilmi Badawi's and Mustafa al-Qulali's distinguishing mark was their love of culture and thirst for knowledge.

Al-Qulali had at an earlier stage been a poet, the author of some sound odes during the 1919 revolution. That did not prevent him from achieving distinction and being among the top graduates in Law, qualifying him for inclusion in a mission.[131] At that point somebody said, "He is a poet." That could have been enough to deprive him of the opportunity, but for God's grace. Since that day, al-Qulali dreaded that description. He applied himself assiduously to the Law, delving ever deeper into it. Yet one's inner nature will not be denied. Although he had severed relations with the writing of poetry, yet his taste for anything that was art or culture remained alive, growing and developing.

As for Hilmi Bahgat Badawi, he was an extraordinary personality. We detected in him no particular artistic tendency, and he did not himself practice any kind of art. But his was a superior intellect that opened out on all the branches of knowledge, and a heart sensitive to all the varieties of art. Although we saw him immersed in the driest branch of Law—civil law, his specialty—yet whenever poetry or music or narrative literature or drama were mentioned, we found him conversing in it and living emotionally in it as if it were his field of special-

ization or as if his breath depended on it. And if again we left these topics for economics or politics or public events in Paris or international news and conditions anywhere in the world, his participation was that of the profound researcher. He manifested intellectual and emotional integration to the fullest extent possible in a man.

He made no secret to me of the lines of the future as he had drawn them for himself. It was part of his reckoning that he should become a minister of State. With him, the word did not represent one of the cheap ambitions of youth. It had a deep meaning. In his view, a potential minister or a statesman was someone with an all-round formation because he was one day to have charge of the all-round future of a nation.

Nevertheless, despite this planning for his future, he did not later seek a ministerial chair as many of our colleagues did by the easiest and cheapest route, by sheltering in a political party or seeking connections with political personalities. On the contrary, he remained upright, aloof, distant from political pettiness and party humbug, attentive to his duties as a university professor.

In this capacity, he wrote a book on civil law that was unlike any other, for his unique, all-embracing personality gave him a special outlook on law. He received the highest State prize for it.

He occupied a succession of senior posts, with the ministerial appointment to which he had looked forward in his youth within reach, yet he did not stretch his hand out to get it. Eventually, shortly before the 1952 revolution, he was invited to become Minister of Finance but refused. The invitation was insistently renewed but he as insistently refused, for he did not want the ministerial appointment merely to be a minister. He did not accept until later when he felt that he could do something, and

he did do many things while he was Minister of Trade and Economy and until he was needed in an even higher capacity as President of the Suez Canal Council after it had been nationalized. Then God called him to His realm while the nation was still in need of him.

When he was a Professor in the Faculty of Law and I the Director of Investigations in the Ministry of Education, we agreed to live together in a flat in Giza. He knew my aversion to lodging problems and household management, so he willingly took charge of all this on my behalf. All he feared, he used to say, was that he might wake up of a morning and find that I had packed my bags and run away, leaving him a note expressing my loathing and irritation at such a life, returning to a hotel and landing him with all the burdens of a rent contract for that large dwelling!

The one who put this idea into his head was our friend Dr. Husayn Fawzi when he came to us on a visit from Alexandria, where he was director of the Institute of Marine Biology. He used to remind him of what I got up to in Paris, of my sudden flittings from hotel to hotel, from quarter to quarter, from a *pension de famille* to more impersonal lodgings. He related to him what happened when I asked him to move my baggage and belongings surreptitiously from the home of a family I stayed with in Courbevoie. When my friend Fawzi came creeping with embarrassment, he was met by the lady of the house who, whenever he called on me, used to accompany him on the piano while he played the violin. She assumed he had come to play music and give delight, whereas he had come to help with my removal and sneak me out. Hilmi would listen to Fawzi recounting such tales, then suspicion would stir in him and he would turn to me with his

gentle smile and say, "You wouldn't do the dirty on me, would you?" And I would reassure him and still his fears.

In fact, I did not 'do the dirty' on him. We did not break our lodging partnership until he began preparations for marriage, whereupon I returned to hotel life. I asked him then what present he wanted on the occasion of his marriage, and to my astonishment and delight he asked for something that would not occur to anyone, at least anyone who did not have Hilmi Bahgat Badawi's culture and personality. He said, "The only present I ask of you is the handwritten first draft of your book *The Return of the Spirit*."

Yet during his long illness, I was not among his many visitors. He knew how I felt even at a distance. He knew my ill-nature and forgave me it. The one time I met him shortly before his death, he received me with his affectionate, limpid smile. To the flood of speeches and obituaries at his death I contributed not a word; but I am certain that in his grave he still harbored for me the same affection, the same love, for he was a great man.

May God rest your soul, my loyal friend, you whose shadow, whose mere shadow behind a window was my greatest stimulation to perseverance and study. If I did obtain my *licence* in law in that year of desperation, it was thanks to your shadow looming afar, as a symbol of will-power and determination.

16

The appearance of my name among the recipients of the *licence* in Law was a great surprise for me. Immediately after the examination, I had gone to my family in Alexandria, in that big house, as far as one could be from any thought of success. All my thinking was directed at completing that operetta or *opéra comique* which I called *'Ali Baba*, so it should be ready for the following season. Suddenly the telephone rang. I paid no attention. But my ear registered a shout of joy from my mother, as she kept repeating on the telephone, "May God bless you too! May God bless you too!" Without much concern, I asked myself, "Who is being blessed, I wonder?" But soon everyone in the house was bursting in on me and shouting, "Congratulations!" "For what?" I asked. They said, "You have passed the *licence*."

I did not believe it until they brought in the newspapers. There I saw the customary formula: The gentlemen whose names follow have passed the examination for the *licence*. I looked for my name and found it at two removes from the bottom. I thanked God that two had been found to be worse than I. Great was my joy all the same: I had passed, I had the *licence*, and that was that.

But after the first joyous reaction, I turned to contemplating the future with a feeling between perplexity and self-questioning. What am I to be now? Advocate? Prosecutor? My inclinations were not in that direction. I did not consider long, for I was deflected from such thoughts by the arrival in Alexandria for the summer of the 'Ukasha troupe, to put on its plays—mine included—in a hall called the Zizinia Theater.

Naturally I immersed myself into the company of actors and singers. They had taken up lodging in a modest hotel in Stock Exchange Street, which was full of beer halls. The leading comedian, Muhammad Bahgat, enjoyed nothing so much as going down from his hotel to the street to sit at one of the tavern's tables on the sidewalk, wearing a native robe and wooden clogs. The director of the troupe, Zaki 'Ukasha, had taken up residence in a luxury hotel worthy of his status, deeming it sufficient to call every morning in a carriage from which he did not even alight, to check on the members of his troupe from on high and with a great show of superiority. When he saw Muhammad Bahgat sitting in this guise, he said to him, "What? Our great comedian in a robe and clogs in the public street?" And Muhammad Bahgat—God rest his soul—retorted, "Am I on stage, appearing as Sultan Saladin or Richard the Lionheart in clogs and robe? Here in the street I am Sultan of my own realm! In clogs or in old bauchles—it's my business!" Zaki 'Ukasha

did not deign to answer, but looked down in contempt and merely ordered the coachman arrogantly and haughtily, "Drive on, my man!" As the carriage moved away, Muhammad Bahgat spat behind it with gusto saying, "Devil take you with all your airs!" He then turned to me at the next table and asked, "Isn't that the right thing to do?" Laughingly, I expressed approval of all he had done.

I do not know who informed my parents that I was mired in the company of buffoons—was it some acquaintance or relative who had seen me in their midst? All I know is that I sensed they had misgivings about me. One day my father confronted me over my future. He said that it would not be possible for the time being for me to enter the prosecution service, as it was open only to the top graduates, and I was among the last. There was no choice therefore other than to work as an attorney for a while, and he had in fact taken the initiative of inscribing me as a practicing advocate, paid the fees and subscription on my behalf, and chosen the office in which I was to operate.

Noticing my lack of enthusiasm and evasiveness, he came out in the open and asked, "Come on, tell me—is it your intention to make a career of buffoonery?" Mitigating the expression, I answered, "I love literature, and want to make my career in it." In a tone encompassing fear, guidance, and warning, he said, "You want to do what Lutfi did?" I asked, "Lutfi who?" He explained, "Lutfi al-Sayyid. He was our colleague in the judiciary, but he kept saying 'Literature, Literature' until he abandoned the law and became a newspaperman. That didn't do him any good, so he returned to employment. Some of his old colleagues such as Tharwat[132] and Isma'il Sidqi Pasha helped him, and in the end put him in a dump called the National Library."

The irony of fate saw to it later, after my father's death, that I too left Government service to work for the press—a newspaperman—and later still to return to officialdom in that same dump known as the National Library. As the saying goes: The censurer is put to the test!

The fact is that literature and a career solely in it were not taken seriously in a society that gave respect, prestige, and wealth only to Pashas or to men of authority and position in government, in management, and in the judiciary. If Shawqi[133] had not held an important position in the Palace and had not had a personal fortune, society would have looked at him no differently from the way it looked at his colleague Hafiz Ibrahim, as no more than a vagabond or a clown in the eyes of the great men of State, who might favor him with a job cast at him with gracious condescension.

Literature offered no encouraging examples. The ones who lorded it over poetry and prose were Shawqi, Hafiz, and al-Manfaluti. But my special interest in the theater made me give greater attention to its leading writers, such as Muhammad Mas'ud, Muhammad Taymur,[134] Lutfi Gum'a,[135] and Ibrahim Ramzi.

I did not get to know Shawqi personally until later, when he turned to the theater and was working on *The Death of Cleopatra*. I was in Paris at the time, and he came there one summer. We met in the Café d'Harcourt which I usually frequented in the Latin Quarter. He told me that he had attended many of the rehearsals of the 'Ukasha troupe, including those of a play which he thought was mine because he was told that its author was in Paris. He asked me for a list of all the French plays which had dealt with Cleopatra so he might look at them.

Before my departure for France, however, I used to hear every now and again that the great poet Shawqi Bey

was irritated by the attacks that some of the young writers and poets had launched against him and his poetry. It also reached my ears that a brilliant young Azhari was attacking the rigidly conservative learned men of al-Azhar in violent articles. It never entered my head then that some ten years later a friendship would be formed between me and this genial Azhari, that we would have an enjoyable time together on the Alps, and would record our enjoyment in a book.[136]

What I was hearing, however, had echoes that scarcely extended beyond the immediate environment. It had not yet been magnified into a noise that reached all ears, nor attained the range and importance of what came to be known later on as the School of Renovation.[137] Yet in a few years everything was to change at a vertiginous pace.

I returned from France to find political conditions undergoing rapid development. The resulting parliaments and parties, which spent money without measure on journals and writers who acted as their spokesmen, had the effect of raising the status of newspapers and newspapermen, at the time when the theater and its writers had tumbled down to the depths. The 'Ukasha troupe was no more: it had gone bankrupt and disappeared. The Ramsis Theater was tottering and dying. The names of Muhammad Mas'ud, 'Abbas 'Allam, Lutfi Gum'a, Ibrahim Ramzi, and others, had been turned off even as the footlights were turned off.

Instead, as the star of journalism rose, new names were shining: the names of Taha Husayn, Haykal, al-'Aqqad, and al-Mazini.[138] These were no longer obscure, pale names lost among the great lights that dominated the heavens of poetry, prose, and theater before my departure for France. It was they who were now luminous,

outstanding, prominent on the horizon of politics first, of literature second.

For these young people had started their careers in the political press, and had grown with its growth. Since by virtue of their formation and inclinations they were poets and prose writers, they took advantage of the opportunity and carved out a place for literary expression. They would write the political article required of them, then reserve a page or a few columns to their literary hobby; this was often of no importance to the politicians or newspaper owners who were party members, but they tolerated it for the sake of the political articles. This was how these writers managed to pursue their renovating efforts in criticism, poetry, and prose literature, at a time when writers for the theater had come to a full stop along with it.

I was truly distressed at what had happened to the theater when I had returned with my bags full of the yield of various cultures pertinent to it. It occurred to me to go in search of my old friend Mustafa Mumtaz, to breathe in from him some of the aroma of a bygone day. I found that he had abandoned writing altogether. In a tone of sorrow and distress, he said, "The Theater is dead." I asked him what he was doing, then. Calmly and seriously, he said, "I am working on transmuting copper into gold."

I thought he was joking, but he assured me that that was his interest now, that he was reading about it in ancient books, that in fact the was up to his ears in these books and had mastered some of the wonders, sciences, and secrets they contained. When I inquired whether he had in fact changed any copper into gold—the hobby having almost tempted me—he asserted that he had actually done so, but that after he had got hold of all the brass implements he could find in the house, melted

them, and burned incense and read incantations, all that he had produced was a very small piece of gold, worth less than half the price of the brass that had been melted. That was the problem that now concerned him and to which he was seeking a solution. Besides, there was the difficulty of summoning the jinn with incense and incantations. It was an extremely exhausting process.

When he saw the look of astonishment on my face, he set about explaining to me at length the truth about the world of the jinn, what happens in it, and how it relates to our human world, all in his smooth, pleasing, convincing way and after his long and detailed study of such matters, until in the end I imagined myself surrounded on all sides by—in the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate!—our friends 'the people down below,' and I found it extremely difficult to get a hold of myself and bob up again to the surface of the daily life from which I had come. The subject did pervade me, for I always believe the wonders of mysterious forces, whether they are called jinn or, as they are today, electrons!

When I recovered a little I tried to change the atmosphere, and indicated that I wanted to return to writing for the theater, but in a new way and in a different direction, producing works of substance now that I had seen, experienced, and studied, and had benefited from my cultural contacts with art and literature abroad. With sincerity and frankness he advised me, "Listen to me—don't bother. The Egyptian theater as we knew it is over." He was right. The theater in Egypt at the time was dead.

I did not reopen the subject of the theater with this old friend, and I did not meet him again except by chance some years ago. By then he had retired, and had surrendered his pension in return for land from the Administration of Real Estate, just like many other retired

officials, who had yielded to the temptation and received land that needed reclamation instead of their assured pounds and piasters, fully reckoned and counted at the beginning of every month. When he saw me, he exclaimed in his usual merry way, "This time I have succeeded in transmuting gold not just into copper, but into dry dust!" God rest the soul of this dear friend and outstanding man of the theater.

The death of the theater in that period calls for some questioning as to its causes. There is no doubt that the feuds between the political parties had diverted people's minds from art and artists. The economic crisis that swept the whole world and Egypt in particular in 1930—and this is probably the main reason—affected the theater as it affected other things. At any rate, I saw before me no scope for staging the varied plays I had written. The only companies still active were amateur ones, such as the Association of Patrons of the Theater. I saw in it a link with the past, so I wrote for it *A Bullet in the Heart* and handed it to my old colleague Sulayman Nagib. I wanted this to be a departure from the adapted comedies which were mere caricatures, depending for effect on verbal quips and farcical surprise turnabouts in the action, the chief characters of which were Kishkish Bey and 'Egypt's unique Berberine.'[139] I wanted dialogue between lifelike characters to be the sole source of effect. But apathy soon spread even to the Association of Patrons of the Theater, and this play too remained unproduced.

Then the rising new journalism cleared a space for me that was a kind of personal theater on paper. On it I could present whatever images of life and of society I pleased, unaffected by the disarray of the theatrical companies round about me and their recurrent crises at the time. That prevented the severance of my connection with, and my interest in, the theater and the writing of drama.

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It was therefore not easy to convince my father, after I had obtained my *licence* in Law, of the seriousness of a career in literature and the future it might afford. The outstanding names in it, as I have mentioned, did not encourage one to cite them as exemplars. Lutfi al-Sayyid had not yet become Rector of the University or Minister of State. If I had mentioned Shawqi Bey, the poet, to my father, he would have answered that his standing in society depended on his previous appointment in the Palace and on his great fortune. As for Hafiz Ibrahim, he was an argument against me, for literature had led him to beggary then to seeking a salaried post, so he was made Assistant Director of the National Library. Al-Manfaluti had been an employee too all along, and so were Muhammad Mas'ud and Ibrahim Ramzi. As for Lutfi Gum'a, he was

a lawyer. In the end, therefore, there was no escaping Government employment or the equivalent if one was to endure the calamity of literature in our country. And even those who had managed to endure the calamity with the help of a job were not immune to being followed by a curse in their Government job or in other work because of their attachment to literature.

For all that, my father did not hate literature in itself, nor did he despise it at heart. He still retained his early love of it. I often heard him while he was on his own intoning lines of pre-Islamic poetry as a comment on some matter or some behavior, or in describing some person, although it is true that he did not compose a single line of poetry after he married.

I do not know why I never applied myself to the task of collecting his poetry. Perhaps it was because I did not know that I would one day be writing about him or about me. I have the impression, however, that his poetry was mostly in the form of aphorisms. It was not that emotions did not interest him. On the contrary, behind a façade of gravity and staidness, he was merciful and humane. He did not overflow with sentiment or gush with emotion that would burst out like foam on a storm-tossed sea, as was the case with my mother. For he had the power of separating his emotion from his intellect. With him all things, even the most deeply loved and the most sacred, were subject to the balance of his intellect and to his probing that he might determine their pros and their cons in justice and equity.

He was the opposite of my mother, who was ruled by her emotions. She was all unrestraint and excess, either overflowing love or unremitting hatred, with no middle way or moderation.

At the same time, my father's inner self was something limpid and settled, deep under the surface of a calm sea.

He did not laugh much. I never knew him to guffaw. All I saw or heard from him in situations provoking laughter was a smile and a soft "Hmm." He was truly punctilious—in matters of money, of words, of everything, alike with himself and with others. He would bring a piaster out of his pocket or a word out of his mouth only carefully and probingly. Here again he stood in contrast to my mother, whose nature was always lavish, releasing coins and words with tumultuous ease and raging generosity!

With such a contradiction between my parents, I believe that what I have inherited from them is unsettledness! I am generally more inclined to economize and withhold than to expend, whether it be money or words. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why I have favored the theater. It is an economical, miserly art. In it words are carefully reckoned, time is restricted, space is limited. There is no room there for the excessive or the uncontrolled. And yet there are times when I undergo a sudden lightning fit of impetuosity and extravagance with words or with money, from which I soon recover and restrain myself, then let go, then restrain myself, and so on. Again, there sometimes breaks out of me a sudden burst of temper, or a startling, fiery reaction, or an outflow of enthusiastic words, of which I become aware and so calm down before I burst out again, and so on. It is the contest between father and mother in the depths of me!

My father was, besides, a high-minded and chivalrous man. He did good turns to many people without their knowledge, without the left hand finding out what the right hand was doing. I have at times chanced to meet men who held respectable judicial appointments who would come up to me saying with warmth, "God rest your father's soul! But for him we would never have had such positions." And when he noticed some young lawyer

who pleaded well before him, he would take the initiative of reporting his excellence to the Prosecutor General or to his colleagues in authority, saying, "If you are looking for an outstanding young man who has no connections by which to reach you, then So-and-So is your man. I do not know him personally. I know only of his competence before me." The next thing So-and-So knew, he was being sought for appointments he did not even dream of, and he would not know at the time how they came his way.

My father appreciated good performance and hard work in any occupation. He also liked order and self-reliance. I am perhaps like him in this: I like order and abhor chaos. I cannot stand a crumpled piece of paper on my desk. I also prefer to carry out all my own tasks by myself. As for my father's precision or punctiliousness in money matters, I must add that it had nothing to do with stinginess. He was indeed punctilious, but he was not miserly. This is why he never accumulated money. This also I inherited from my father. People who know me are sometimes surprised to find me turning down tempting offers of money, especially in matters that touch on literature and art. I am indeed careful of my rights, but in my writing I never considered the readership I could reach in the context of financial gain, or success in terms of material reward.

My father also had in his dealings a semi-ascetic approach, even to food. At the table, he used to say to us, "Is there anyone who will eat more than one banana?" And I am like him in this. I dislike a multiplicity of dishes on the table because it fragments my enjoyment. I would rather have one well-prepared dish. I am a gourmet, and consider an expertly made dish a work of fine art.

At the same time, my father was ruled by a stern logical, intellectual tendency. But intellectual logic is

treacherous. Just as it may persuade one to hold back, so it may persuade one to spend. This is why he would consider it excessive to buy a cup of coffee unnecessarily, yet he would spend irresponsibly on masons or brokers for the sake of a fantasy of the validity of which he had become convinced. His misfortune was to become convinced of something. It was always easy to win him over by logic.

He was also pious. He performed the five prescribed prayers every day, and fasted during the month of Ramadan,[140] at which time he was careful, after I had become an adult, to wake me up so I might have the predawn meal with him. I used to do so, and then still have my usual breakfast in the morning without his knowledge.

In spite of his piety, when some intellectual problem—about Paradise and Hell, for example—was broached before him, he could be carried away by logical consideration and abstract thought until he sensed he was on the edge of unorthodoxy. I discussed this matter with him once after my return from Paris, starting by asking him, "Is there really a Paradise?" He began by turning the question this way and that, investigating it as if it were a case before a court, going into 'underlying reason' and 'principal cause,' debating whether the purpose was to awaken one's longing or rouse fear, or whether what was intended was a moral paradise and a symbolic fire, and forging forward in a free intellectual discussion until he came to an inference that almost contradicted the text of the Qur'an, whereupon he suddenly became aware of the dangers of the slippery slope, sought refuge and pardon with God, and went off to pray. When, laughingly, I taunted him, "What is the good of prayer when you have just denied what is in the Scriptures?" he answered, "I

have denied nothing. I was just thinking. Prayer is one thing and thought setting off at a tangent is another."

My mother on the other hand believed absolutely in God, with all her unbridled emotions. There was nothing else to it—except that she always imagined God in her service and on her side, never on anyone else's!

Although my father had abandoned poetry, prose literature, and books after his marriage, he remained in full command of the language, a master of good style and precise expression. When 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi was President of the Court of Appeal, he used to admire the opinions expressed in my father's early judgments and suggest that some be published in the *Advocates' Journal* or the *Judicial Gazette*—without my father's knowledge, for I have known no one so reluctant to advertize himself, so modest, so unconcerned for himself with regard to clothing or food or preferential seating, nor did I ever hear him boast before us of something he had done or said. He had no equal in his desire for obscurity and anonymity, away from the limelight, nor in his distaste for boisterous meetings or boon companionship in parties or in clubs. To my knowledge, he never spent an evening in a place of entertainment.

His life was dry and stern. The only pastime he knew was taking long walks. And if anyone met him in the street and asked where he was going, he would answer with a vague gesture of the hand, which revealed nothing. His answer to a personal question was never enlightening, for he did not like to cast a light on himself, or to indulge other people's curiosity in this respect.

Here again my mother was the exact opposite. She was self-confident, loved the limelight, and hated obscurity and indifference. And once again what I have inherited is oscillation between a liking for the light and an aver-

sion to it, sometimes without knowing why I am content or why annoyed, or why I shy away from public banquets or receptions or invitations or meetings. Even when my own plays are being presented, I seldom find in myself nowadays the desire or the drive to attend them. This is so often the case that some believe it is a pose that I strike, whereas the fact is that I am cramped by this nature of mine and resent it, for it deprives me of a great deal. Yet I do not know whether it is truly my inborn nature or a response contingent on my state of health and my ennui.

No, I do not know. But what is certain is that I feel uneasy and shy away from any meeting, especially if it exposes me to making a speech. I felt after my first performance as a prosecutor before the Criminal Court that I was not cut out for such situations. I am not quick in my responses, not ready-witted. At unexpected turns, I search in vain for words or for ideas. Even if I have to read from a written text, I stammer if eyes and lights are concentrated on me or if I become aware of listeners and watchers around me.

I do not know why this calamity has hit me, for my father, I learned, was one of the ablest of speakers and pleaders when he was a prosecution agent, so able in fact that a leading lawyer (in days when not all practicing lawyers were certified) invited him to work with him as an attorney and a partner, at a salary which only a consultant magistrate commanded. My father had to refuse, because his own father wanted him to be a judge so he could browbeat the bailiffs who came to confiscate property!

Such was my father. My mother was boldness and fluency and unrestraint personified. She experienced no embarrassment in anything she had to say, and no confusion in any situation she had to face. I alone am therefore responsible for my affliction. I do not know what caused

it, unless it be the solitude and silence that have accompanied me during a substantial part of my life.

Another characteristic of my father's was the spirit of irony and humor that emanated from his words and actions without his straining for it and without any change of expression in his stolid features. It is said that his court sessions were enjoyable, full of witticisms which issued from him while he remained serious and calm, without a smile. There were, I learned, some who made it their concern to transmit his *bons mots*. One of them was the late consultant magistrate Zaki Khayr al-Abutigi. He started his judicial career under my father's direction, and he related that when he was appointed a judge in Asyut, he went to assume his functions buoyantly and briskly, but was met by the president of the court—my father—with a look of scrutiny and doubt, asking, "Have you got anything to prove that you are the new judge?" The young judge was taken aback, for he had not expected to have to prove his identity. But my father went on, "How do we know that you are not an impostor or a trickster claiming to have been appointed to our court? Are we to let you sit on the bench with us merely on the strength of your assertion that you are the new judge? Go your way, Sir!"

Young and shy, the judge was at a loss what to do. How was he to 'go his way' when he had been assigned to this court? He turned to my father appealingly and said, "Does it make sense that I should gatecrash the court and sit with you without having been appointed? What do I look like—a trickster or a judge?" My father peered closely into his face and said, "As for that, it is difficult to say. You could be either. At any rate, come in and sit with us. We'll take a chance—on my responsibility, and let the chips fall where they may!"

My father's personality and his hidden inclinations, then, were not of a kind to make him eschew literature. On the contrary, it seems to me that in his inner self he yearned for the opportunity of indulging his inclinations freely. That, no doubt, was his repressed wish, repressed by his society and by his family and financial circumstances. Certainly his finances, before marriage and even more thereafter, did not allow for that luxury which today is called literature. A father's frustrated wish is perhaps what he does pass on to his children.

Had my father been able to find an outlet for his literary tendencies and wishes, he would have spared me and freed me from this pull of literature, and I could have turned unfettered to something else. The sons of men like Lutfi al-Sayyid and Ahmad Shawqi did not resort to literature because their fathers did not repress their own inclination but found an outlet for it and released it into their lives in all the fullness of its energy and power.

My father therefore cast upon my shoulders what his circumstances did not allow him to carry. I am the prisoner of the wish he did not fulfill, and indeed the prisoner of many things I have inherited from him, some good, some bad. I have similarly inherited from my mother what was good and what was bad in her. For she was kindhearted, but she also had the spirit of evil in her, especially toward an aggressor, except that she had no malice in her at all, for she was open—sometimes defiantly open—and could not bear to hide anything in her breast. My father on the other hand was also goodhearted and seldom moved to evil; but he was often underhanded, seldom open. I have inherited all this in differing proportions.

This prison that I live in, made of wall-like inherited traits—could I have escaped from it? I have often tried, as

every prisoner does, but it was as if I were moving in permanent fetters. The tragedy became evident to my eyes one day when I was analyzing myself, and it occurred to me that only a minor proportion of the life I was living was my own, the greater proportion being that mixture, kneaded like dough, of contradictory elements deposited in the generative fluid out of which I was formed. Furthermore, that small proportion of my life left to me free has been spent entirely in striving and struggling against the obstacles which my parents themselves, and at the back of them the society of that time, placed across my way. For my father who bequeathed to me the love of literature is himself the one who tried to turn me away from literature; and my mother who bequeathed me willpower stood with her will in the way of my artistic desires.

My remaining freedom, therefore, is my only opportunity, and the only weapon I can use, to overcome these obstacles. My freedom is my thinking. I am a prisoner in what I have inherited, free in what I have acquired. The intellectual and cultural edifice I have erected for myself is my own. It is in this that I differ from my parents entirely. Here is the source of my real strength, with which I resist.

Yes, my thinking, my intellectual formation, this is where all my freedom resides. Man is free in thought and a prisoner in his nature. I do not know whether it is by sheer coincidence that I wrote about intellectual formation in *The Flower of Life*[141] before I wrote about natural formation in *The Prison of Life*. The flower of our life is thought, and the prison of our life is nature.

Faced with my insistence on devoting my life to literature despite the difficulties, the advice, and the obstacles that tried to turn me back, my father began to think

seriously about me. He laid out his fears before me frankly. He said he did not object to my involvement in literature except as a principal occupation, for his duty as a father was to direct his son to a dependable path. Literature was no path to a livelihood for someone who had not a fortune of his own. He knew that I was not due to inherit such wealth that it would be right for me to concern myself solely with literature as did Shawqi, or even Lutfi al-Sayyid, who would one day inherit enough from his wealthy father al-Sayyid Pasha Abu 'Ali to relieve him of the necessity of earning a living. In my father's estimation, therefore, it was indispensable for me to have an employment that would support me; there would be no harm then in indulging literature as a hobby. And my father ended with, "Anyway, there is Lutfi al-Sayyid. Come with me, and let us get his opinion."

My father took me to his old friend and colleague. I had the impression that he had remembered him on the spur of the moment, for I was certain that he had not met him for years and years, as he was by nature loth to create or renew profitable relationships, even with old friends who had risen in life. I have inherited from him this undesirable trait and accentuated it, to the point that I am sometimes irritated by, and incapable of observing, the simplest rules of civility—such as offering congratulations or condolence, or inquiring about someone's health—even among people dearest to me. And I am equally uncomfortable when they inquire about me. Those close to me know this, they understand me, and they leave me to this nature of mine.

I am even worse at creating a circle of connections. I have not tried to establish links even with men of letters and artists whom I ought to have cultivated, especially those who have written about me or presented my work

abroad. I went to Paris recently and was within easy reach of some of these, but I did not see a single one. I was asked there which of their men of letters I was in touch with, and I replied, "No one." There was surprise at my answer, then I was sent a number of invitations to meet some but I remained aloof, not out of distaste but because of a physical, instinctive reclusiveness that defies understanding.

I always balk at a new relationship. I do not easily open the door of my inner self to the first person who knocks. This strange behavior often manifests itself in my life, and it irks me; I reproach myself and determine to change, but then I fall back into it. This lack of drive and movement is my incurable disease. It has lost me many opportunities and much enjoyment in life and in art. I work, and then refrain from bringing my work to fruition. I am energetic at the task, but sluggish at ensuring its success. If success has come my way, it has in many cases dropped in my lap in unknown and unexpected ways. Most of my time is spent sitting motionless, in a constant debate with myself, in constant activity inside my brain, dismantling the universe and putting it together again. Everything in the world and in society matters to me, moves me, stimulates me; but my body does not move much. People dropping in on me are often surprised to find me sitting idle, without a book or paper or pen before me, like a statue of stone.

And yet I have never isolated myself, nor secluded myself except in a physical sense. It is odd that I live constantly, with a soul and all my strength and all my thinking, in the issues of my time, but I do not find in my body the same activity and energy. Opportunities have not been lacking. Arrangements have been made for me to see what I ought to have seen and meet people I ought

to have met. But my capacity for missing chances is greater than my ability to take them. It is as if Fate afforded me the opportunities in the assurance that I had the apparatus for wasting them!

I did not even make anything of the availability of Lutfi al-Sayyid when he was President of the Academy and I a member of it to establish the connection through which I might have obtained the information he alone possessed about my father, his youth, his generation, his contemporaries. What I have recorded here is what such a generous friend as al-'Aqqad—to whom I am grateful, and on whose soul I invoke God's blessing—conveyed to me directly from 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi, with whom again I have been in contact only casually.

However, this material inertia and physical torpor of mine is not in fact the result of heredity. It is fair to say that my father, for all that he turned his back on many things, was a mass of energy and motion in his own realm. Unlike me, he never held back from what he perceived to be useful in his work. As for my mother, she was perpetual motion personified. She would not tolerate inactivity or seclusion even when ill. The doctor examined her heart once and ordered her to bed, but she could not abide this for a single day. She would have preferred death. She was out carrying her umbrella, plying across the field, supervising the sowing and the harvesting and the dredging of the drains and the feeding of the cattle; then she was back to the barn overseeing the threshing of the wheat or the rice, the weighing of the cotton, and other such demanding tasks.

I am therefore responsible alone for my laziness and failure. One of the characters in *The People of the Cave* says, "Any life is a gift, and the greatest gift to be given to a creature is life." Yet I myself, regrettably, have not been

able to benefit from this gift as I ought to have done. A great deal of my ability and my talent—if they exist—has been lost because of my nature as leaky as a sieve, with a hundred holes made by idleness and hesitation and neglect. Moreover, medicine has it that the main threat to my health nowadays is my lack of energy and movement.

I am constantly calling myself to account and asking: Was it possible for me to have made better use of artistic creativity than I have done despite this nature, this nature which has imprisoned me and wasted many artistic opportunities? But also: Was that possible despite the conditions surrounding literature and art, in a particular society at a particular juncture, conditions which forced the likes of me to waste a great deal of time and effort in finding out where to set foot in new arts whose ground was unprepared? I do not know. I only know that I shall die asking myself why I was not better than I was, what this prison is that confines me to what I am . . . .

I also ask myself: What is this art for the sake of which we undergo such trouble? There is no doubt that it is something desirable, for I have experienced love of it since the dawn of childhood. Every human being is born with love of art in one form or another. Man is man because he likes to contemplate his self, to wonder at it, or laugh at it, or think about it. And art is mankind's device for contemplating its own features and knowing itself. This is what has driven mankind to thought and evolution. If an animal were to contemplate its self, to know it and analyze it, it would immediately turn into a human.

Let me return to my father and say that he took me to his friend Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, who was at the time Director of the National Library. We dropped in on him and he welcomed us and had us sit next to him. My father

said, "This is my son Tawfiq. He has obtained the *licence* in Law and has been entered in the register of practicing lawyers, but his inclination is toward literature." An expression of pleasure and satisfaction appeared on Lutfi al-Sayyid's face, and he hastened to reinforce an opinion that had occurred to my father but about which he hesitated. He said to my father, "Send him to Europe to work for the doctorate. When he comes back, he will be appointed either as a professor in the University which the Government intends to found and inaugurate soon, or in the Mixed judiciary, which will entail residence in one of the major cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, or Mansura.[142] There he will have the scope to satisfy his fondness for literature."

My father turned to me saying, "I think this is the solution." We rose to go, thanking Lutfi al-Sayyid, who accompanied us to the door. We left carrying a copy of his translation of a book by Aristotle,[143] and by the time we reached Bab al-Khalq Square just outside the Library, the idea of my going to Europe had taken root with us.

My father started calculating what that would cost him, but he did not retreat. To him, my departure meant salvation from that arty milieu which he knew I was deep into and which edged out any serious interest in Law or in any other respectable occupation.

We returned to Alexandria and broached the subject of my departure with my mother. She fell into a dejected silence for a little, and could not work up much enthusiasm, for she already had in her head another plan, which was to marry me to a bride who was a rich heiress, something which, in her practical mind, would provide me with lifelong insurance and also surround her with security. She had in fact once written to my father, in her barely literate style:

> Today has happened a strange and happy news, but the fear—oh, what a fear! —is from that ass Tawfiq, and it is up to you to put his brain right in his head and that he should accept this bride who is a gift. I am waiting for you to come for the sake that you must go to the probate court before anything else and find out how much is saved up for the bride and what is her income exactly.

However, my father and I kept at her until we convinced her of our point of view. I do not know how it never crossed her mind at the time that if I were to marry it would be on the same lines as my father, with very different considerations from her own; for the basis of marriage for me as for him was compatibility in mentality, and mutual understanding in life, and nothing else. And I did later marry the best possible wife.

My father set about arranging the trip, inquiring of the bank how to transfer the monthly sum I would need, and ascertaining what the cheapest level of existence in France would be. We then booked a second-class berth on an old French ship called the *General Metzinger*.

On the day of departure, I embraced my mother and grandmother, who were in tears, and with my father I headed for the harbor. I boarded the ship and stood on deck looking for my father on the quay. He was standing under his white umbrella waving to me with his hand, then, as the ship moved out, with his handkerchief. The sight of him, of this staid father stifling his emotions under the mask of a calm goodbye, made my tears flow in spite of myself. Egypt receded and I headed for the unknown.

*

I spent in Paris the years of which an approximately accurate description will be found in *The Flower of Life*.[144]

Then I returned to my country. I returned with the self-same bag which I had carried with me. In it were two suits, four vests, four shirts, and six handkerchiefs. I returned with them all, not one item missing. I returned with wooden crates filled with the books I had collected during those years. I returned with all these things. Only one thing did I not bring back, and that was what I had gone out to get: a doctorate in Law. My slowness of understanding and my poor memory, in addition to the weight of the pervasive cultural struggle, into the thickest of which I had thrown myself, and the intellectual voracity which seized hold of me before the greatest spreads of civilization—all these left the like of me without the power or ability to shoulder another burden.

I was received by my parents in the way that a flop and a failure is received. It happened that they heard sounds of rejoicing near our house, and when they inquired what the occasion was, they were told that a pavilion had been set up and glasses of syrup were being handed round to feast a neighbor who was also a colleague of mine and who had returned from abroad successful and triumphant, crowned with a doctorate. My situation was all the worse for this. I saw anxiety and grief and sorrow in my parents' eyes, and could hear them whispering around me, "The shame of it! The shame of it!"

And now: This has been a portion of a life. I did not intend it to be the narrative of it, so I did not keep to the familiar way of relating a biography, following a chronological order of events. Rather, I have in most instances mingled times and occurrences in order to reach straight into the heart of the matter sought here—namely, the uncovering of something relevant to the formation of this nature of mine, behind the prison bars of which I have been thrashing all my life.

Notes

1 *Yawmiyyat na'ib fi-l-aryaf*, translated as *The Maze of Justice* by Aubrey (later Abba) Eban.

2 The prosecution service was modeled on the French 'parquet.' The hierarchy was headed by a national *na'ib 'umumi* ('prosecutor general') and included, in descending order, a *ra'is niyaba* ('chief prosecutor') in each provincial capital, a *wakil*, ('agent, substitute'), a *musa'id* ('associate'), and a *mu'awin* ('assistant').

3 The word is also the name of a tree, the *acacia nilotica*.

4 Still in use among the non-Westernized is an 'Arab' clock according to which, as in Biblical usage, the day begins with sunset, reckoned to be 12 o'clock.

5 See Qur'an 19:27–33.

6 The debts incurred by Khedive Isma'il (1863–79) led to growing interference by European powers in the affairs of Egypt. Sir Evelyn Baring, later Lord Cromer (1841–1917), first came to Egypt as Commissioner of the Debt in 1877 and rose to be the British High Commissioner, wielding such power that he has been described as 'the uncrowned king of Egypt.' He was recalled

following the Danshaway incident, mentioned in Chapter 9 below.

7 A reference to Qur'an 21:68–69, which relates how Abraham was cast into a great fire by his idolatrous tribe, but God ordered it to be "cool and wholesome unto him."

8 In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term *fellah*, literally 'peasant,' was applied, not without derogatory connotations, to anyone of Egyptian stock—hence references to Colonel 'Urabi and his associates who led the Army revolt that led to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 as *fellah* officers. Only nomads were called Arabs, and almost any other Ottoman subject was thought of as a Turk.

9 An ascetic around whom many legends grew; d. 875 or 877.

10 The references are to Khedive Isma'il and Colonel 'Urabi, mentioned in the preceding notes.

11 Here and elsewhere the author uses the word *qiddis*, which is the Christian word for a saint, whereas the Muslim near equivalent is *waliyy*, 'elect.'

12 This being all that is needed for a divorce under Islamic law.

13 Al-Husayn was one of the sons of 'Ali who in turn was both the nephew and the son-in-law of the Prophet; he therefore had some claim to the caliphate. In 860, al-Husayn and his retinue were cornered and massacred by Umayyad forces near Kerbela, some fifty miles northwest of Kufa in Iraq. Among Shi'ites his martyrdom is still celebrated annually by elaborate pageants and penitential acts.

14 Under the Ottomans, Egypt was officially ruled by a governor who had the title of Pasha, although by the middle of the nineteenth century the office had become hereditary and during his reign Isma'il (1863–1879) obtained the distinctive title of Khedive. The palace of Ras al-Tin was the Khedive's official summer residence.

15 The major feast in the Islamic calendar, celebrating Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Ishmael—Qur'an 37:102–107.

16 It is part of the Islamic marriage contract that the groom pay a sum to the bride's father.

17 With bracketed insertions by the author. The multiplicity of dates reflects the fact that both the Gregorian and the Islamic calendars are used, and that in Arab as in Biblical reckoning, the twenty-four hour day begins at sunset.

18 A platform usually of mud bricks, often built by some leading

family in the village and serving as a meeting point during hours of leisure.

19 Al-Azhar is the most prestigious institute of higher learning in the Islamic world, and the one with the longest continuous history. Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) was one of its most distinguished graduates and eventually one of its rectors; he led a reform movement of seminal importance in modern Arab thought.

20 1870–1951. A graduate of al-Azhar and of the Law School, he rose to be the President of the National Court of Appeal. Also active in politics, he became President of the Liberal-Constitutionalist party in 1924, and Minister of Justice in 1925. He was admitted to the Academy of the Arabic Language, and is noted for his translation, from the French, of the *Institutes* of Justinian.

21 1875–1950. A founder-member of the main nationalist party, the Wafd, he later turned against it and founded the Sha'b party. He was Prime Minister in 1930–33 and in 1946–47. He was noted for his financial ability and his severe authoritarianism.

22 Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1873–1963), scholar, translator of Aristotle, and Rector of Cairo University, the first modern university in the Arab world. As founder of the newspaper *al-Garida*, he was influential both in politics and in literature, nurturing the talents of several modernist writers.

23 So called because cheaply printed on paper that soon turns yellow.

24 A leading writer of his generation, prolific and versatile (1889–1964). He has perhaps been most influential as a literary critic, but was also a political journalist and a doughty polemicist.

25 The reference is to the widespread practice of having each student in turn take down, reproduce, and distribute notes to the rest of the class.

26 The word is placed between parentheses because titles had been abolished by the Republican regime.

27 Years earlier, Lord Cromer in his memoirs (*Modern Egypt*, London, Macmillan, 1911, pp.771–72) had taken credit for "prominent instances of Egyptian reforms," including his abolition of "the three Cs—the Courbash, the Corvée, and Corruption." The courbash, a strip of hippopotamus hide tapering at the end, "was employed on every occasion when coercion or punishment was required, but notably for the collection of taxes and for extracting either the evidence of witnesses or the confessions of persons

accused of crime."

28 All these locations are in Upper Egypt, progressively further South.

29 Under Islamic law, a husband has only to utter three times words that clearly signify his intention to repudiate his wife for the divorce to become legally enforceable.

30 Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Walid ibn Muhammad ibn Khalaf al-Tartushi, i.e. of Tortosa in Spain, 1059–1126 or 1131.

31 Dating back to a little more than a century before Islam is a substantial body of poetry, of which some, numbering seven to ten in different collections, are considered masterpieces and set the standard for poetry for ages to come. One explanation for the name by which they are known is that they were so highly prized that they were written in letters of gold and suspended within the main shrine in Mecca.

32 The Major Feast commemorates Abraham's sacrifice; the Minor one marks the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting.

33 An unusual work of al-Hakim's, part novel part play, is *The Anxiety Bank,* which deals semi-humorously with a bank that trades in this very common commodity.

34 In communities too small to have a mosque, a delightfully simple substitute is provided. A rectangle of beaten earth is set aside, with no more than a low mud wall to mark it out and keep dogs out. Keeping it clean and usually covered with straw mats is all that is deemed necessary to make it fit for worship. It is always situated next to a canal because ritual washing has to precede prayer.

35 "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God."

36 Founder of the Disuqiyya or Barhumiyya dervish order, born between 1235 and 1255, died at the age of 43. Although orthodox Islam acknowledges no saints and no intercessors between man and God, popular religion has an extensive cult of holy men around whom mystic brotherhoods have crystallized. Their *mulids* ('birthdays') are the occasion for elaborate celebrations in which the brotherhoods with their distinctive banners and headed by a *khalifa,* i.e. the successor to the founder of the order, have pride of place, but to which secular entertainments (including such a pageant as is described here) also bring all the fun of the fair.

37 Salama Higazi (1852–1917) was one of the giants of the Arab

theater when it was thought of largely as entertainment and produced almost no written literature. His immense popularity rested mainly on his singing, although he himself tried to give acting its due. He was paralyzed toward the end of his life, and his lines were then spoken by another actor but he was carried on to the stage on a litter to sing the highlights.

38 i.e., in 1910.

39 These all figure in a huge folk epic cycle—one of several, some named in the next paragraph—which embroiders freely on the history of the Hilali tribe. Native-type cafés, i.e. those not run on Western lines and serving Western-type refreshments, often had resident folk performers, but these have now been ousted by radio and television. Folk arts of many kinds have other venues, however, and are still very much alive.

40 During the first half of the century at least, Egyptian State schools were run on a rigid system with an extensive range of compulsory subjects and formal end-of-year examinations, the results of which alone—not age—determined whether a pupil moved on or repeated the year.

41 In the heyday of Muslim power, black slaves were sought mainly for manual work, white women slaves, often Circassians, for concubinage. They and their offspring enjoyed high prestige.

42 From the Turkish *pesref*, a musical overture, usually stately and slow.

43 A gifted musical innovator, 1845–1901.

44 The text has 'Sidi al-Bistami,' clearly an error.

45 To keep them away from the women's quarters.

46 1849–1918. Editor of a succession of newspapers, Arabic language inspector in the Ministry of Education, and author of several treatises and of some poetry.

47 Fénelon's *Télémaque* was the first substantial European literary work translated into Arabic by Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), as early as 1848. *Othello* was one of several Shakespeare plays translated early in the twentieth century by a leading poet, Khalil Mutran (1872–1949).

48 1859–1932. The play in question, *La Foi*, dates from 1909.

49 The author's first novel, published in 1933, known to be semi-autobiographical. It is set at the time of the 1919 uprising against British rule, the title exploiting pharaonic belief to imply that Egypt's national spirit, rooted in ancient history, was manifesting itself again.

50 Left wing critics have attacked the author for being, on the contrary, almost Olympian in his aloofness. One of his early books, published in 1941, was entitled *From the Ivory Tower.*

51 At the end of the primary stage and at two points of the secondary, pupils throughout the country were gathered in a number of centers and sat identical papers in all subjects. They were not only marked, but also ranked, on a national scale.

52 An extensive series of adventures by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Alain.

53 A character created by Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail, 1829–1871.

54 Presumably *The First Men in the Moon.*

55 'Amr ibn Bahr, nicknamed al-Jahiz ('the goggle-eyed'), b. Basra c.776, d.868/9. A genius of immense productivity and versatility, leading theologian, pioneer of literary criticism, and virtually the first great writer of literary prose in Arabic.

56 The implication is that he was a product of the traditional stream of Islamic education, generally looked upon as traditionalists, as against the graduates of the modern University, who adopted Western dress except that they wore a fez rather than a hat, and are therefore dubbed 'tarbush-wearers.'

57 'Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf d. after 808; Mihyar the Damascene d. 1037; 'Umar ibn Abi Rabi'a c.644–712 or 719.

58 One of the proudest and most distinctive achievements of Arab modernists is that they have abandoned the ornate style of their immediate predecessors in favor of an easy, flowing one, and the author was particularly noted for his simplicity and directness.

59 If a fez lost its shape and stiffness or got spotted with water, it was taken to a special shop where it was pressed between two heated brass implements in the shape of truncated cones.

60 Al-Hati, originally the name of a particular caterer, came to be the term for any restaurant that specialized in grilled meats, mainly *kufta* and *kebab*. At the opposite end of the social scale was the *masmat* or scalding house, where the carcase and cheap cuts of meat were made into a stew.

61 1880–1959. In 1904, he was sent at the Khedive's expense to France, to the Paris Conservatoire and trained under Sylvain. He returned to Egypt in 1910, to put on plays at first in French, then in Arabic. Although his attempt to run a company of his own, described here, was financially unsuccessful, he yet had a long career on the stage and in the cinema, and his emphasis on

dramatic rather than musical quality marks a turning point in the history of the Arab theater.

62 Built in 1879 as part of the celebrations for the opening of the Suez Canal. Verdi's *Aida* was commissioned for the occasion, but was not ready in time, and *Rigoletto* was performed instead. Until destroyed by fire in 1971, it was a splendid venue for all forms of theatrical presentations.

63 The text reads 'Taymur,' clearly a misprint. The play, *Louis XI* (1832) was by Casimir Delavigne, 1793–1843. In it, the character is a Duke, yet later in this chapter he is referred to as a Count.

64 Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti (1876–1924) was the most popular prose writer of his day. His were mostly short pieces, essays or very short stories, both tearful and edifying—one of his collections is indeed entitled *Tears*. Although he knew no European language, he also 'translated,' or rather retold in his own way, several French novels.

65 The title of *khawaga* was reserved for Europeans and for Christian Arabs, especially Syrians. George Abyad was of Lebanese extraction.

66 It is this household that is described in the author's novel, *The Return of the Spirit*.

67 Last of the pre-Islamic 'kings' of Hira, who were in fact Christian vassals of the Persians. He reigned late in the sixth or early in the seventh century. Many legends were woven round him and his eventual disgrace and death in a Persian prison.

68 Egypt had licensed prostitutes then. Brothels concentrated in one area offered discretion of a kind, in that no one entering a 'red light district' was likely to report on those he met there. Clot Bey was a French medical officer who entered the service of Egypt's ruler Muhammad 'Ali early in the nineteenth century, and founded a medical school which became the nucleus of the first modern Arab university.

69 These being stock characters in conventional love poetry.

70 A sex manual by Ahmad ibn Sulayman, known as Ibn Kamal Pasha (d. 1533/34). The full title, which in Arabic rhymes, as did most other titles at that time, is *The Old Man's Return to his Youth in Coital Potency*.

71 Herbert Spencer, 1820–1903.

72 1853–1917. A Lebanese who graduated in medicine from the American University of Beirut, he moved to Egypt where he ran the journal *al-Shifa'* from 1886 to 1891. He boldly espoused Dar-

winism, and wrote extensively on scientific and literary subjects.

73 1872–1932. A leading poet of the period, also noted for his translations and at least one long narrative in prose.

74 These are well-known in the West as Al-Gazel (1058–1111), Averroes (c.1126–1198), and Avicenna (980–1037).

75 The reference is to classical texts favored in traditional educational institutions, and usually printed on poor paper that quickly turned yellow and brittle.

76 Short narratives, first attested in the tenth century, about the mild depredations of a likable rogue. The story element soon took second place to the displays of verbal dexterity of which the anti-hero was capable.

77 Ahmad Fathi Zaghlul, 1863–1914. Brother of the nationalist leader, Sa'd Zaghlul. He studied in France, and became an authority in legal matters. He was also one of the first to translate non-fictional works without having been commissioned to do so by the Government.

78 Ibn 'Abd Rabbih was an Andalusian writer and poet, 860–940; al-Mubarrad was born in Basra in 826, and died in Baghdad in 898; Abu 'Ali al-Qali, 901–965, moved from Baghdad to Andalusia in 942. The works cited are huge compilations of literary and philological observations, characteristic of the production of the period.

79 A Persian called Ruzbih, better known as 'Abd Allah ibn al-Muqaffa', d. c.760, whose translation of *The Fables of Bidpai* became the first important work of literary prose in Arabic.

80 The title under which *Romeo and Juliet* became known.

81 Muhammad 'Uthman Galal, 1829–1898. A man who found time to produce many translations, although also employed in a succession of important and onerous Government posts. He made a determined effort to have colloquial Arabic accepted as a literary medium.

82 Journalist and fiery orator. In 1906,an altercation took place between British officers and the villagers of Danshaway and savage sentences were passed on the Egyptians deemed reponsible. Mustafa Kamil conducted a campaign of denunciation both in Egypt and in France that is held to have led to the recall of Lord Cromer. Following this success, he founded the Nationalist Party, but died soon after.

83 1886–1956. Writer, journalist, and leader of the Liberal–Constitutionalist party. He is credited with having produced the first

Arabic novel of literary merit. This was *Zaynab*, written in France in 1913 and published in 1917 as by 'an Egyptian of *fellah* stock.'

84 Egypt's first modern University was founded in 1908, but had no official status. It became a State university in 1923, first as Fu'ad I, later as Cairo University.

85 *Shagarat al-hukm* ('The Tree of Power') is the title of one of al-Hakim's books, published in 1945. On his attitude to politics, see Pierre Cachia, "Idealism and Ideology: the Case of Tawfiq al-Hakim," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 100, 3 (July-October 1980).

86 Al-Ma'arri, i.e. of the village of Ma'arra in Syria, 973–1058, was a blind poet noted for his skepticism, but the reference here is to his prose work, *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, which depicts—some think ironically—the Afterlife.

87 'The Songs', a huge compilation of material about literature and men of letters by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, 897–967.

88 Enrolled in the School of Law at the same time was another who was to make a name for himself as a writer, Yahya Haqqi (b.1905). Tawfiq al-Hakim makes no mention of him, but in his own autobiography—*Khalliha 'ala-llah* (Cairo, al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1987, pp. 42–43)—Haqqi writes:

> An arm's length away from me sat one who—alone among all the students—wore a very short fez. Thick-toothed and slightly goggle-eyed, he sat resting his chin on his clenched fist, his gaze wandering, his thoughts astray, his clothes clean, his collar starched. He hardly ever addressed any of his classmates. I used to surmise: "He is no doubt the son of well-to-do parents who comes to school not to exert himself and sweat, but just to look on and amuse himself. It's all the same to him whether he passes or fails." This is why despite my long observation of him—for there was something that attracted me to him—I never tried to associate with him or get to know him. That was Maitre Tawfiq al-Hakim at Law school. As I remember, he never boasted to anyone that he wrote plays, although he had done so while still a student in our midst. By his silence, his shyness, his avoidance of company, his diffidence with strangers, Tawfiq al-Hakim misled me about himself.

89 Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux, 1688–1763.

90 1827–1899. His critical pieces were collected by Adolphe Brisson under the title *Quarante Ans de Théâtre*, 1900–1902.

91 At a time when theatrical companies revolved round one person

who was owner, manager, and star actor, and who wrote or commissioned plays that were seldom published, al-Rihani (1891–1949) concentrated on comedies into which he injected increasing doses of social criticism. In many plays he appeared as Kishkish Bey, a village headman who comes to Cairo, where he has to contend with city slickers. As will be seen below, 'Egyptianizing' a play meant not only translating it, but giving it local characters and a local background.

92 Actor who, in 1908, formed *al-Jawq al-Misri al-'Arabi* ('The Egyptian–Arab Troupe') and toured the provinces with musical plays.

93 Actor and producer who formed his own company 1907–1913.

94 1862–1921.

95 i.e. he played the part of one of the many Nubians who worked in Egypt mainly as house servants or waiters, and whose broken Arabic he exploited for comic purposes.

96 Muhammad Tal'at Harb, 1876–1941, was trained in law but became an enterprising and highly esteemed businessman who in 1920 founded Banque Misr and a number of associated industrial concerns, and also showed an interest in cultural ventures. He is here compared to Sa'd Zaghlul, 1857–1927, a lawyer and politician who, after holding a number of high offices, founded the Wafd party, and was by far the most popular (although not unchallenged) nationalist leader of his day, especially during the negociations and agitation that followed the first World War, and led to the acknowledgment by the British of Egypt's independence in internal affairs.

97 The son of a Pasha, Yusuf Wahbi, 1896–1982, used the wealth he inherited to found the Ramsis Theater in 1923. In a very long career on stage and screen he was noted mainly for his dramatic, or melodramatic, acting.

98 Muhammad Kamil al-Khula'i, 1875–1938, is credited with composing the music for some thirty-five plays.

99 1870–1937. First to write opera; credited with composing more than five hundred songs.

100 1892–1923. Started as a Qur'anic reciter, then proved a gifted musical innovator who produced the score for several musical plays.

101 A cabaret show in Egypt was one in which dancers and comedians presented a family entertaintment until midnight; after that only men remained, and the entertainers mingled with them at their tables.

102 A suggestive distortion, in that *shahwa* is the Arabic for physical, including the sexual, appetite.

103 *Mulukhiyya* is Jew's mallow, a herb out of which is made a thick sauce to accompany meat dishes, and in Egypt in particular a soup. *Kushari* is a dish of which the main ingredients are rice and lentils.

104 Goha is a character comparable to Eulenspiegel, known under slightly different names in most countries of the Middle East. Goha's waterwheel is one that keeps turning while drawing no water, even as Goha's gate is one that is not connected to any wall, but stands in a desert region separating nothing from nothing.

105 First mentioned in Chapter 3.

106 Presumably he set it forward, not back as stated here.

107 The title of *mustashar* was given to some judges on a selective basis.

108 The white *yashmak* was worn by upper class women; others wore a black *burqu'*. The reference is to an incident during the 1919 uprising against British rule, when veiled women were placed at the head of a demonstration to embarrass the police by forcing them to take action against women.

109 Qasim Amin, 1863–1908, wrote two books on the subject before the end of the nineteenth century, *Tahrir al-mar'a* ('The Liberation of Women'), translated into English by Samiha Sidhom Peterson (AUC Press, 1992), and *al-Mar'a al-jadida* ('The New Woman').

110 One of the earliest and most successful of Muslim generals.

111 Literally, the word used—*iqtibas*—means 'taking a brand, or a live coal, out of a fire,' but as indicated below it was not used in a strict sense.

112 Founder member of the first amateur theatrical company, *Gam'iyyat ansar al-tamthil* (The Association of Patrons of the Theater'), in 1912. He was also at one time manager of the Opera House.

113 Another long-lived and prolific man of letters, 1894–1973, credited mainly with pioneering the short story, although he also wrote plays, novels, essays, etc.

114 1884–1949, prolific writer, dramatist, novelist, and translator, not to be confused with an earlier namesake, 1867–1924, who was a journalist who also did some translation.

115 1872–1940, journalist, historian, translator, who also held a succession of Government positions.

116 Born 1853. The date of his death is unknown, but al-Hakim's reference to his obituary indicates it must have been c.1933.
117 1884–1939.
118 The author wrote a number of plays which he described as 'cerebral,' making out that the conflict in them was between abstract ideas, such as the 'ideal' and the 'actual.'
119 A well-known producer, he directed the School of Dramatic Art, founded in 1930.
120 *Ahl al-kahf* exploits the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, briefly mentioned in the Qur'an. It dwells on their inability to cope with a changed society after their sleep of hundreds of years.
121 1898–1973, the most celebrated prose writer of his generation.
122 The reference is to Khalil Mutran's eminence in both poetry and prose.
123 In addition to her career on the stage, she founded a satirical magazine bearing her name and long edited by her son Ihsan 'Abd al-Quddus, 1919–1990.
124 By Edmond Rostand, 1868–1918.
125 The author points out here that the Arabic for stage, *masrah*, used to be pronounced *marsah*, a variant accepted in modern dictionaries.
126 Born 1900. Rector of Alexandria University 1957–59. At one time Minister of Culture and National Guidance.
127 Early socialist, 1874–1922. Syrian-born, founded a succession of journals in Egypt, and briefly in the United States. He is credited with several plays and many translations.
128 A reference to Qur'an 12:53: "The self is prone to evil."
129 Old socks could be rolled and sewn together into a ball of about the size of a tennis-ball, and especially if there was a proportion of ladies' stockings it would have a fair amount of bounce. The game usually played with it consisted of setting up a target called *mis*, usually a brick or a stone; the team defending it would get the ball into play by hitting it with, the hand in a variety of ways (for example backward over one's head), and the opposing team could get the player out either by catching the ball before it had touched the ground or by hitting the target from wherever they stopped the ball. It was of course possible to play other games as well, and from what the author says some paragraphs further down, he seems to be referring to soccer, although making a satisfactory ball large enough for the purpose was not easy.

130 Reading *yar'ah* for *yan'ah*.

131 Promising students selected for further studies abroad, usually in a West European country, at the State's expense were said to be 'on a mission,' i.e. on a scholarship.

132 'Abd al-Khaliq Tharwat Pasha, Prime Minister in 1922 and in 1927–28.

133 Ahmad Shawqi, 1868–1932, along with Hafiz Ibrahim, was considered the leading poet of the Arab world in his generation. Late in life, he wrote five plays in verse and one in prose. the most celebrated being *Masra' Kilyubatra*, ('The Death of Cleopatra').

134 1892–1921. Mahmud Taymur's elder brother and short-lived literary mentor.

135 Muhammad Lutfi Gum'a, 1886–1952, author in 1912 of a long narrative, *Layali al-ruh al-ha'ir* ('The Nights of the Perplexed Soul'), considered one of the forerunners of the novel.

136 The reference is to Taha Husayn, and the book *al-Qasr al-mashur* ('The Enchanted Castle'). This was little more than a parlor game, in which the two writers represented themselves contending over Scheherezade, whom Taha Husayn had greatly idealized and al-Hakim treated more cynically. They wrote alternate chapters, each ending with the other in some awkward situation from which he had to extricate himself.

137 The term was Taha Husayn's, and was meant to emphasize that the aim was not to reject inherited values, but to give them new life by adapting them to modern conditions.

138 1890–1949. Like most writers of his generation, Ibrahim 'Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini contributed to many genres, but is celebrated mainly for some pioneering novels and essays, often graced with touches of humor.

139 The references are to the characters created by Nagib al-Rihani and 'Ali al-Kassar.

140 Throughout the month—which may, since the Islamic calendar is regulated by the moon and not the sun, occur in high summer—observant Muslims abstain from food, drink, or smoking during the hours of sunlight. They will therefore get up early enough to have a meal before dawn, the next one being after sunset.

141 *Zahrat al-'umr* was published in 1943.

142 Because of concessions, known as Capitulations, made by the Ottoman Sultan in the sixteenth century in order to facilitate trade, the nationals of some European powers were not subject to Egyptian laws. 'Mixed' tribunals, with rules and judges of

their own, were created to settle cases in which the interests of Egyptians and of these foreign nationals were at variance. The Capitulations were abolished by treaty in 1939.

143 It was *The Constitution of Athens.*

144 Also in the author's *'Usfur min al-sharq* ('Bird from the East'), published in 1938, translated into English by Bayly Winder (Beirut, Khayat, 1966).

TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM, (1899–1987), was one of the great formative figures of twentieth-century Egyptian literature. Immensely prolific and versatile, he was the first Arab to acquire a literary reputation as a dramatist, and was the author of more than seventy plays of remarkable variety, as well as of a number of novels, short stories, and essays.

This autobiographical essay, written in the simple and direct style leavened with humor for which Tawfiq al-Hakim is justly renowned, covers the early part of his life until the mid-1930s. It represents an attempt by the author to understand himself, largely in terms of his genetic inheritance, and his candor produces a number of touching self-revelations. Even more substantial is the rare witness to the character of family and social relations in Egypt in the early twentieth century. But most arresting and valuable of all are the author's reminiscences about the Egyptian theater in the 1920s and 1930s, providing for the historian of Arabic literature a mine of first-hand information.

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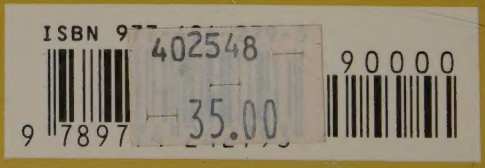
Photograph of the author by Shawqi Mustafa

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